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RATTLING RUBE; OR, THE NIGHT HAWKS OF KENTUCKY.

BY HARRY ST. GEORGE,
AUTHOR OF "ROARING RALPH ROCKWOOD," ETC., ETC.



THE NIGHT HAWK'S RAID.

Rattling Rube;

OR,

The Night Hawks of Kentucky.

BY HARRY ST. GEORGE,

AUTHOR OF "ROARING RALPH ROCKWOOD,"
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

RATTLING RUBE, THE WOLF-SCALPER.

"LISTEN!"

The speaker raised his hand to command silence. His companion came to a halt, with one foot advanced, and for a full minute neither of them stirred. Around them stretched the grand old Kentucky forest, with its multitude of giant trees that reared their majestic heads heavenward. The stillness of death seemed to have descended about them, as even the usual sounds of the woods were missing. How long they would have remained in this listening attitude, had it been dependent upon the speaker, no one could possibly guess, for Rube Rand was well known to be the most patient of men; indeed, Job was nowhere in comparison. It was his younger companion whose stock of patience ran out.

"I reckon you're mistaken, Rube," said he.

"Mistaken; *me* mistaken?" exclaimed the older hunter, in a tone that implied more than it said.

"Yes, I reckon so. The best of us can get out of gear—"

"Hark; did ye hear that?" interrupted Rube, eagerly, as a low but very distinct cry, borne by the cool western breeze, was wafted to their ears. It was decidedly human.

"Some fellow-being in distress. Let's walk that way."

They hastened onward as fast as their unfamiliarity with the ground would permit. The view was a magnificent one, such as can only be obtained in the heart of old Kentucky. Monster trees surrounded them. From some of these hung wild grape vines, festooned and forming fantastic figures, not a bad reminder of the hieroglyphics on the Egyptian pyramids. Soft velvety moss covered the ground here and there, making as dainty a carpet as was ever trod upon by lord or high-born lady. Every dozen yards opened up new and glorious scenes—vistas that stretched to the right and to the left, far as the eye could reach.

But the two hunters had no eye for beauty at that moment. A human cry rung out at intervals, as if some unfortunate was suffering. As they advanced the sounds became

more distinct, until there could be no question that they proceeded from a human being. It was just when this became quite certain that the cries ceased as if the man's breath had given out.

Badly puzzled as to what this all meant, the hunters hastened onward, even though the voice no longer directed their steps.

Had death overtaken the man? That last shout had died away in a wail that might easily be considered a last breath. On philosophical Rube this seemed to produce no effect; but his younger companion could not help shuddering. A shout, a gurgling cry, a most horrible shriek, all mingled in one, if such a conglomeration could be possible, suddenly rung out. Even Rube could not prevent a slight start, and as for his companion, he was badly shaken.

"Heavens! what fearful sound was that?"

Rube did not reply, but turned his eyes upward. A large bird was sailing over their heads, lazily flapping its wings. It was a buzzard. Whatever the hunter thought he said nothing, but marched hastily forward.

Another half minute, and they entered what was to all appearance a small glade in the heart of the forest. No sooner had they left the shelter of the trees than a voice rung out:

"Help! for the love of God, help!"

Both men looked about them in amazement. From whence did the cry proceed? Not a person was in sight, but a hollow groan had the effect of directing their attention to a certain point.

Something moved among the branches of the tree. A black object could be seen, two, three, a dozen of them. They were buzzards. Every foul bird seemed to be craning its neck, and watching a certain point below; and as the hunters looked, one of the feathered scavengers dropped from its perch to the earth, and hopped forward. Another of those fearful shrieks burst forth, but this time it ended in a sob, as though the speaker was terrified almost into convulsions.

The daring bird arose in the air but only went a few yards before settling again. Those among the branches of the neighboring trees went through a form of movement, but seemed quite accustomed to the awful clamor.

Now that their attention was directed toward the ground the two hunters could distinguish an object that, at the distance of thirty yards, looked like a large ball. As they gazed, however, it moved. Then the truth flashed upon them.

"Great Heaven! It is a human head!" exclaimed the younger.

"Beavers and bearskins, it is," and Rube

was sufficiently amazed at the sight to lose a trifle of his stolidity.

Something moved behind the man's head. A skulking form made its appearance. It was an immense gray wolf, with his white fangs glistening in a frightful manner. As it passed the buzzard, the fierce animal snapped viciously at the bird, but kept straight toward the unfortunate man. By turning and twisting his neck, he could catch a glimpse of the new-comer. His shouts and shrieks were absolutely fearful, yet the wolf was neither awed nor moved from his purpose.

The younger hunter seemed stupefied with horror. Yet no sooner had Rube's eyes fallen upon the gray figure skulking up behind the human head, than a fierce look came upon his face. Evidently the hunter cherished some special grudge against the lupine race.

The wolf slowly but surely advanced, snarling and showing his teeth; but the wretched man buried up to his neck in the earth could not raise a hand in his own behalf. His horrible cries might well give the believer in a future hell a faint idea of the agonies of the lost soul. Then the cries died away altogether; the poor wretch had fainted, for the wolf was within a yard of his victim; but at that moment the long rifle carried by Rube, sounded his death-knell. The sharp crack rung through the forest, reverberating from cliff to cliff, until it gradually died away. That wolf never moved again.

The younger hunter ran forward, and with his knife began loosening the earth around the man's chest. Rattling Rube paused for an instant to coolly cut a notch in the stock of his rifle where several long rows could already be seen. After performing what was to him almost a religious duty, the hunter moved forward to the assistance of his comrade.

Between the two of them, the unfortunate was taken from his grave, still senseless. A rough-looking character, Rube decided, even while throwing some water, from the creek close by, upon his face. While his comrade was watching the fellow's return to consciousness, Rube whipped out his knife, and very deliberately commenced scalping the dead wolf, much to the other's amusement. Was he only keeping his hand in, or had he some purpose in this strange act?

CHAPTER II.

THE NOTCHED RIFLE.

"FOR God's sake don't put me back in that grave. Kill me, if you will, but don't do that."

The wretched man had regained consciousness, and these were the first words he gave

utterance to. He had struggled to a kneeling posture, and clasped his trembling hands together as he made this prayer. Rattling Rube gazed on him with scorn, for he hated a coward worse than poison. His young companion could not help feeling some pity for the man whom their timely arrival had rescued from a fearful fate.

"How on earth did you come to be in such a scrape?"

The man looked at him before replying. He was fast regaining his wits, which evidently were not lacking in shrewdness.

"I was put in there by Dare-Devil Dick and his gang of horse-thieves," said he, slowly, watching the other's face.

"Dare-Devil Dick! Ah! then we are on the right trail!" muttered the young hunter.

As for his companion, Rube was intently examining the dead wolf, and growling to himself that he'd rather look at a defunct one than a living specimen. Evidently the hunter had not been very favorably impressed with the man's face, for he gave him the cold shoulder altogether.

"If you live in this neighborhood, perhaps you can direct us to the town of Clarksville; or it may be you are going that way?"

"No, not just at present. My business takes me in the opposite direction. You see that giant sycamore yonder? When you reach that, a path lies at your feet. All that remains is to follow it up and you'll reach Clarksville. 'Tain't more'n five miles."

"Do you know if a man named Turner Hall lives there?"

"Do I? Wildcat Turner! I reckon," returned the man, emphatically.

"I'm glad of that; it will save trouble. Well, we shall go on. Rube, aim for that bent sycamore yonder. Good-day."

"Good-day and luck go with ye. If ever a chance offers, you'll find Tom Crawley don't forget a favor like that, and 'twas more than you think, as you'll find out at Clarksville."

Leaning against the tree under whose branches he had been so lately buried alive, with the open grave and the dead wolf beside him, the man who had called himself Tom Crawley looked after his preservers. The sinister smile had given place to one of extreme cunning.

"Likely as not that youngster'd 'a' let me go if I'd 'a' told the truth, but I didn't like the looks of that other feller. He had a pretty good idea that Dare-Devil Dick and me wern't quite strangers. Well, he wasn't far wrong. I like that boy; he's got a good heart, something I never had. Well, well, we can't all be alike. I'm shaking like as if I had the palsy, and I won't get over it till I get some brandy. I'd

give the best hoss we've taken this season to be somewhere around, out of sight, but close by, when Wildcat Turner hears the news," and as the man, after a hurried glance at the hole in the ground, strode rapidly away, he grinned horribly to himself.

Upon reaching the immense sycamore that had been pointed out to them, Rattling Rube and his companion found the path without much difficulty. They walked along some distance in silence, and then the young man spoke up:

"Rube," said he, "you disliked that man's looks. What have you against him; what did you see?"

"This much," returned Rube slowly; "he is every inch a scoundrel. He lied to you. I could see him watch your face in order to discover whether you believed him or not."

"But this is a mere supposition. You readers of faces are just as apt to make a mistake as any one else."

"Granted," replied Rube, smiling, "but there was no mistake made there. As soon as I set my eyes on that man's mug I knew he was a rascal. Why, boy, do you think the great Maker caused the face to reveal the nature of the man unless there was a reason for it? I tell'ee, bad passions will leave their traces in the end. Did you hear what he said? Gratitude made him that far honest that he said you might rue the act yet. He's a bad 'un every time, I'll take my oath on it."

"And yet you saved his life," said the young man.

The other winced a trifle; then lifted the rifle he carried, and pointing significantly to the freshly-cut notch, said:

"Probably I should have been human enough to have saved even the foulest wretch under the sun from such a horrible fate; but if I had seen his face before I fired, I confess it might have made me hesitate. I wasn't thinking so much about the man when I drew a bead, as the wolf itself."

"Then you have a special hate for wolves?"

"Hate? Well, I'll tell you, boy, I could spend every hour of my life hunting 'em down, with satisfaction. Do you see that scalp? Well, if I've got one of that kind stored away in my old cave among the Rockies, I've got all of a thousand."

"What a waste of powder and lead," thought the young man, but he only remarked that it was a considerable number.

"You can well say so. I'm not much given to talking, but on this subject, once get me started up and there's no stopping me. I'm generally reckoned a cool customer; in fact, there ain't many men who can go through what I can without a nerve trembling, even if I do say it myself; but, God

knows, it ain't because I haven't had cause to be nervous.

"I feel just a trifle pegged-out, so what d'ye say to taking a seat on this here log. I'm going to tell you just why I hate the whole race of wolves worse than death itself. No man has ever heard this story; not that there is anything to conceal about it, but one naturally hesitates to talk about a subject that makes the cold shivers run through him whenever he even thinks over it. Five years ago I had a chum named Joe Burns. A better man than Joe never lived, and I'll swear to that through all time and eternity. Everybody loved him; they couldn't help it, for Joe had a kind word for all he met. I have seen strong men cry like babies when they heard Joe was dead. And yet I, who almost worshiped him; I, who followed him like a shadow, and loved him like a dog may love its master, I never dropped a tear at his death. My grief was too deep for tears. It seemed as though my brain was on fire. But to my yarn.

"We were out hunting among the foothills near the Rockies, Joe and I. How often I have since cursed our stupidity in making such a foolish move, I couldn't say. The winter had been a fearful one, such as no trapper had remembered seeing before, nor have they since. It can be easily surmised that all manner of animals were perfectly wild with hunger. We soon found this out for ourselves, and decided that it would be too dangerous to hunt singly. So whenever we went out, it was together. That was all very well, but it didn't save poor Joey Burns. This is how he went under as near as I know.

"Ten miles from the place where we had made our camp, we first became aware of our danger. Joe made me notice the many skulking wolves. In every direction their savage howls rung out, and with each passing minute they seemed to grow bolder. We turned our faces toward camp. Before we had gone fifty yards I saw there was trouble ahead. Hundreds and hundreds of gaunt wolves made their appearance. Joe turned as white as a sheet, but nary a tremble from him.

"Soon the varmints commenced closing in; on every side they pushed forward, their red tongues hanging out, and their bloodshot eyes fixed on us like death.

"We must run for it, Rube," said my chum.

"Away we went, but those wolves ran faster. They leaped on us as we dashed along, and tried to pull us to the ground. I saw my chum fall, and stopped to help him. Then he yelled out for me to run. I saw him climbing up a tree, and thinking he was safe started off again, full speed. The critters caught up with me again before I had made

two hundred yards, and so I treed. Well, boy, there I sat for forty mortal hours. I must have tired the critters out, for they gradually left me alone. The first thing I did after getting on the ground again, was to make for the back tracks. I found the tree Joey had climbed, and at its foot lay some human bones. They had not even left a shred of my poor chum's clothing."

Rattling Rube had just finished his sad story, when he threw himself backward in a very undignified way, and not only rolled from the log himself, but pulled his companion with him. Nor did the young fellow offer any remonstrance. Just as they vanished from view a rifle-shot rung out with startling distinctness, and the bullet sped through the empty air in the exact spot where Rattling Rube's body had been just a second before.

CHAPTER III.

A MODERN HERCULES.

A GOLDEN sheen lingered in the Western sky, and the bright reflection glanced along the tree-tops. Old Sol had just sunk behind the hilly range that stood boldly out in relief against the sky, and gentle twilight drew on apace.

The birds twittered among their leafy coverts; squirrels frisked from limb to limb; the timid deer came down to the brooklet for a last drink before night enveloped all in her sable mantle. Gradually the bright line in the west grew fainter, changing into a dull gray, then vanished altogether.

Night, dark and gloomy, settled over forest and prairie, hill and valley. The bright stars twinkled in the dark blue vault of heaven, and a beautiful crescent just quivering above the ragged line that shaped the horizon, proclaimed the infant moon. Afrighted perhaps by the faint reflection of her own modest face in some limpid pool, she quickly hid herself behind the friendly hills, and vanished from the scene.

Three men crouched among the shadows. Above them the great forest trees stretched their lofty heads, shutting out what little light the stars were persistently giving.

"Sure ye heard it, Terry?" asked one of them.

"Hush! not so loud. Confound it man, listen; don't you hear it yourself? He's coming this way, too, as sure as my name's Jack Parkhurst," said another of the three.

"Mebbe it's one o' them pesky hoss-thieves," ventured the third.

"Likely enough. Here, Stebbins, you take the lantern. Keep the slide shut. When I yell out 'Now!' throw her open, and put the light on him. As for you, Blake, be ready to assist. Now silence all."

A low whistle could now be heard, as if the person approaching was enlivening his lonely walk. He was undoubtedly familiar with his route, for not a single exclamation told of a mishap. This was wonderful in itself. These three men had lived in the vicinity for years, and yet they were compelled to use a lantern while passing through the woods on such a night, to save themselves from serious injury, for it was an easy thing to tumble into some hole, fall over a log, or run up against a tree. Either the person now approaching was better acquainted with the forest than these old settlers, or else he possessed some sense of intuition that warned him of the traps lying in his way.

Nearer came the sounds. Stebbins had arranged the dark lantern and stood ready to draw the slide. The lonely wanderer was now close beside them.

"Now!" said Jack Parkhurst suddenly.

Stebbins dextrously withdrew the slide, and raised the lantern. The light fell upon the figure of a man, who stood still in his tracks not ten feet away. He was the finest specimen of a shapely human being one could ever expect to see, tall and magnificently formed in his build. His face was exquisitely molded, and almost perfect in Grecian cast. A long mustache gave quite a striking air to his appearance, and made the face seem a trifle cruel. In spite of Rattling Rube's assertion I maintain that the face is not invariably an index to the man. By most people, this man might have been taken for a splendid fellow; what he really was I leave the reader to discover as my tale progresses.

When this sudden glare burst upon him, and he heard the voice of Parkhurst saying "Now" so vehemently, the man came to a full halt. Nine men out of ten would have looked amazed at least, even if they did not start back. This one did neither; he simply stood stock-still. An instant later the voice of Stebbins broke the silence.

"My God! it's Dare-Devil Dick himself," he shouted.

The handsome wanderer through this lonely forest was no other than that celebrated prince of horse-thieves. Stebbins had good cause to remember him. One night, hearing some noise in the direction of his stable, and fearing for the safety of a valuable horse which he had lately bought, he took a lantern, and pistol in hand went out to see if all was right. Great was his surprise to find the stable door wide open. Of course he naturally thought the horse was already gone. A little caution well invested might yet have saved him, but the excited farmer must needs rush wildly in. He had only time to discover that the horse was still in the stall,

When the pistol was plucked from him by an unseen hand. Turning, Stebbins found himself face to face with this handsome individual.

He did not need any telling in order to know whom he was looking at. At a word from the chief, three men came into view, one of them being in the stall with the horse. A couple of revolvers aimed at the farmer's head sufficed to keep him quiet, and while thus bulldozed, his arms were securely bound. In this degraded position, he was compelled to remain and be a witness to the abduction of his much-prized animal. To aggravate him still more, the thieves descanted upon the good qualities of the brute, and hazarded guesses as to his probable value to them. It may be surmised that so long as he lived Stebbins would have a vivid recollection of that night, and the face of Dare-Devil Dick had been as indelibly impressed on his memory.

He might thank his lucky stars that he was safe behind the lantern. His companions were not so fortunate. When Stebbins cried out that this lonely tramp was the chief of the very gang of border pests, in whose interests the meeting of Regulators had been called, to which they were even then hastening, both Blake and valiant Jack Parkhurst were for the time being rendered dumb and motionless with astonishment. Jack was the first to recover.

"Great guns! get hold here, Blake. Won't the boys open their eyes when they see this capture?" he yelled.

Some men are prone to count their chickens before they are hatched. Parkhurst was one of this species. He was not lacking in courage, however, for he led the way himself, with Blake close behind him. Whatever the prince of horse-thieves may have thought of the matter, his action was prompt enough. Taking a step forward, so as to meet the other, he gave Jack a blow on the head that was simply tremendous. Almost any other man would have had his skull cracked. Parkhurst reeled back out of the circle of light into the dense darkness. A heavy fall announced that the crack had been attended with serious results.

Blake came to a halt between two opinions as it were. He hesitated whether to boldly assault this formidable adversary, or scamper away as fast as his legs would permit. Dare-Devil Dick had no idea of waiting until he had made up his mind, but rushed at the former just as soon as Parkhurst had been disposed of. Blake was a much smaller man than either of his friends. He seemed to think that he was about to be made the recipient of a blow similar to that which had caused his friend to vanish so

quickly, for he raised his hand as if attempting to ward it off. The horse-thief appeared to feel too much contempt for such a small man to strike him, and instead, suddenly seized him about the waist, raising him above his head. By an exertion of his almost herculean strength, he threw the farmer from him. Blake sailed through empty space and vanished in the gloom. A great splash, followed by a puffing and snorting, announced that the unlucky Regulator had landed in a pool of some sort, where he was in danger of being drowned in the mud.

Two of the enemy disposed of, Dare-Devil Dick turned to the third. Stebbins had watched this display of skill and strength in sheer amazement. He was powerless to use the old squirrel rifle he carried, but no sooner did the handsome horse-thief make a start in his direction than the slide of the lantern was hastily pushed into its place. Then, taking advantage of the friendly darkness, Stebbins changed his base, and laid low.

A derisive laugh floated on the night air, and a minute later Dare-Devil Dick's whistle sounded some distance away. Stebbins then ventured to throw some light on the subject. He found Blake crawling out of the pool, and truly that individual presented a forlorn appearance. From head to foot he was literally covered with mud. It was plastered half an inch thick on his face, and he continually spat out lumps that had been forced half-way down his throat. Between the two, Jack Parkhurst was brought to his senses, and then the sorry-looking trio took up their march for Clarksville.

This then was the dare-devil horse-thief whom Rattling Rube's young companion sought. There was another personage on the lookout for the handsome rascal; but of that, more anon.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FATAL MARKSMAN.

A SHOT awoke the slumbering echoes of the Kentucky hills. The white smoke curled up and faded away. From among the trees there issued such a scream of mortal anguish as would lead one to believe the fiends from Hades had broken loose.

A dozen men came running through the woods at a headlong pace. Leading them was Rattling Rube. The others were residents of the country, farmers of Clarksville and the immediate vicinity. Rube's presence among them is easily explained.

We left the wolf-scalper and his friend in a predicament. Rattling Rube had caught sight of a shining gun-barrel among the tree-trunks, and thinking a shot from some unseen foe was about to follow, had tumbled

backward over the log on which he had been seated, drawing his companion with him.

The wolf-scalper's movement proved the wisdom of his cautious training. Just as their feet flew up into the air, a rifle cracked some forty yards away, and Rube solemnly declared the ball had passed between his extended legs, which assertion if true, gave evidence that the marksman had taken deadly aim.

Crouched behind the log, the old hunter was quick to act. He poked his long western rifle cautiously around the end of the log, and then took a peep. A gun sounded and the ball flew by within an inch of his face. The hunter answered this shot, and a howl from some unseen party attested to the accuracy of his aim.

There the two men crouched for at least half an hour, during which more than a dozen shots were exchanged. Our friends discovered that they had to deal with more than half a score of enemies. Naturally they thought these men could be no other than horse-thieves intent on demolishing them, never thinking for an instant that they themselves were mistaken for men of dishonest purposes.

Thus the good fight of faith went on. Rube had a beautiful red line across his forehead that he called a "blaze," and which he had received from an affectionate bullet.

But he had more than fully returned the compliment by giving one of the enemy a lovely slash in the arm he exposed when loading his gun, and taking a goodly slice from the leg of a second, who had hard work to keep to his shelter.

Things began to look pretty serious for both sides. True, the enemy were many times their number, but they were compelled to hug their shelter so closely because of Rattling Rube's lightning shots, that they had no chance to make use of this decided advantage, at least up to this time.

Rube, old ranger that he was, knew full well that in the end some of the enemy would probably get in their rear, where being devoid of shelter, they would fall victims, probably at the first fire.

It was at this interesting stage of affairs, that a bustle announced new arrivals, much to the disgust and alarm of our two beleaguered men. Soon a loud, horribly gruff, and pompous voice made itself heard. As far as the two could make out, the owner of these thundering tones kept calling upon his men to advance, and taunting them for cowards, yet at the same time he remained quite invisible himself.

At length some words were let drop that gave Rube an insight relative to their situation. Upon communicating this new idea to

his companion he found him of the same mind, and before matters became any more complicated it was determined to hail the other party.

At first the man with the gruff voice was inclined to be suspicious, but he could only acquiesce when Rube proposed that they two should walk forward without their arms. As soon as Rube's young companion found that this little red-faced man whose gruff voice seemed to come up from his boots, was Wildcat Turner, he whispered a few words in his ears that startled the leader of the Regulators. He took one earnest look at the young man's frank face and then offered a hand to each of them.

They were out hunting the horse-thieves, whose depredations had become unendurable. A meeting had been held during the previous night, at which stern Judge Lynch presided, and as the immediate result a tree in the vicinity bore strange fruit in the shape of three men, old-time offenders, who had been convicted a dozen times over.

The meeting might have been satisfied with its prompt work, had nothing more occurred. But at this juncture the three farmers came in, and related their adventure with Dare-Devil Dick. They presented a forlorn appearance to be sure. Even Stebbins had scrambled into a bush and scratched his face almost beyond recognition. As for his companion, Jack Parkhurst was badly bruised; and a tremendous bump on his head, at least equal to an egg in point of size, told where Dare-Devil Dick's fist had struck him. Poor Blake was a perfect picture of misery, being covered from head to foot with a thick coating of mud.

Hardly had they told their highly embellished story to the indignant and sympathetic audience, when one of Wildcat Turner's men made his appearance panting and perspiring, with news that set the fiery gentleman hopping angry.

"By the tin horn spoon of my uncle, this is adding insult to injury. I for one shall stand it no longer. Those scoundrels must be cleaned out, or I shall quit the country."

"What's the matter, colonel?" asked a neighbor.

"Ah! is that you, friend Coleburn? Matter enough for you and I. This very night those cursed thieves have paid our stables a visit, and while we were taking a horn together at the *Kenton Arms*, your Black Roger and my darling Sachem were on the way through the woods to the home of these rascals among the mountains. Now, gentlemen, here is just the way I feel. I solemnly vow to start out to-morrow after these devils, and never come back unless they are hung up for crow's-meat. A pretty pass

things have come to when an honest Kentuckian can't keep a horse in his stable. Who goes with me?"

"Count me in," was answered to a man.

This was how the Regulators happened to be abroad in the daytime. Wildcat Turner explained it to our friends as they walked along. Rube and the two wounded men had exchanged condolences, and became friends. When they laughingly boasted of having rid themselves of Tom Crawley, our two hunters wisely remained silent. Turner imprompted them into joining the hunt, and they did so from various reasons of their own, much to the delight of the red-faced, active little man, who rejoiced at the thought of having such an experienced trailer as Rattling Rube to bear them company, for it was known that the horse-thieves were possessed of a stronghold in the mountains, which it would be difficult to find and dangerous to attack.

Hardly an hour had passed before they sighted two men in the distance, who were immediately recognized as well-known rascals, having defied the power of the law for many a day. Upon catching a glimpse of the band of Regulators, they started off on a full gallop, with a score of the now thoroughly aroused pursuers in pursuit.

Reaching an open point in the woods, Rattling Rube came to a sudden halt. His long rifle leaped to his shoulder, and the sharp crack instantly rung through the forest, reverberating among the hills, and more distant mountains. Then came a cry full of mortal anguish. One of the runners was seen to cast his arms wildly aloft, and then roll over to the ground. When the pursuers reached the spot, he was stone dead, having been shot through the back.

The other horse-thief had vanished, nor could they catch a glimpse of him in any direction, although the forest was more open at this point than for some distance around. Wildcat Turner's first and only conviction was that the man had been so scared by the death of his companion, that he increased his speed, and had disappeared from view before they came up.

Rattling Rube appeared to entertain an entirely different view.

"Do you want to see me drop the p'izen critter?" asked the hunter in a low tone, as he finished reloading.

Wildcat Turner expressed himself in the affirmative.

"Keep your peepers on me, but pretend to look t'other way."

Rube sauntered forward rather carelessly, looking straight ahead. His rifle, ready for use, was held in the hollow of his left arm. He passed over perhaps twenty yards. Then,

all of a sudden, the rifle pointed directly above him; its sharp crack rung out loud and clear.

Was the hunter shooting for fun? Half a minute passed by; then with a shriek of agony in which his last breath was expended, the body of a man came tumbling to the ground from his lofty perch. It was the horse-thief. Flushed with success, the Regulators hastened on like sleuth-hounds.

"Forward to the mountains," was now their battle-cry.

CHAPTER V.

FIRE WOLF, THE SCOURGE.

AMONG the mountains of Kentucky.

Truly the gigantic hills bordering the shores of the Bitter river, well deserved the name of mountains, for their lofty heads were reared to an altitude almost equal to the highest peaks of the more famed Blue Ridge.

Indeed, being connected with that picturesque range by a chain of rocky elevations, they might well belong to the same family, and the reader may understand what I refer to if at any time in the course of my narrative I speak of the Blue Ridge. Among many of the natives they went by that name, and it will come natural for me to fall into the common error.

It was evening, and while the heavens were yet lighted up with the glory of the setting sun, two men were seen upon the side of a peak that seemed rather isolated from its fellows. Their very appearance betokened extreme terror; it showed in their faces, their actions, and their words.

Both were rough-looking fellows, with whom no one would like to make an intimate acquaintance on a dark night. They carried weapons of all descriptions.

"As I am a living man, Yellow Yute, this place is getting too dangerous for me. First there's them Regulators. You just came from town and say they're out on the search for us. I've told the cap'n time and again that they'll get some man for a leader yet what'll take 'em right through thick and thin, and some day we'll wake up to find ourselves dead, as Barney McGee would say. Now, as if that wa'n't enough there's this devil what's been haunting our ranch the last six months. We've lost three men by his bloody knife, and more 'll follow. You or I may be the next. Whether he's human or the devil himself I can't say for sure, but he hates the cap'n like p'izen, which makes me think he's flesh and blood, for surely Old Nick's on our side.

"We've all hearn his yells in the woods and on the hill, time and again, even in the ranch itself when Prince Hal was found

stabbed to the heart, but they do say no man ever sets eyes on Fire Wolf, the wild man of the mountains, but what dies for it. Ha! listen! God in Heaven, he is coming."

The speaker caught his companion's arm. Both were trembling violently from extreme terror. Superstition always infects ignorant minds; education is the light of the world. Then again a knowledge of guilt will make a coward of a man, and these desperadoes were guilty of almost every crime in the calendar.

A weird cry had rung out from the rocky height, strange and blood-curdling in its tenor. Exactly where it came from, neither could determine. Afraid to move in any direction for fear of meeting the scourge which no man as yet had looked on and lived to tell the story, the two horse-thieves stood, rooted on the spot.

Yellow Yute was the color of parchment. As for his companion, who went by the name of Hank Dolce, he trembled so violently that one could not have kept him quiet long enough to make out what his features looked like.

Again the horrid cry pealed forth, the rocky walls taking up the refrain until it seemed here, there, all around them, in their very midst. Suddenly, a light flashed before their eyes. Where the awful form came from never was made manifest. A horrible figure bearing aloft a flaming torch came bounding toward them.

Be it what it might, man, beast or devil, or the three combined, Yellow Yute and his companion realized that they were gazing upon the terrible Fire Wolf.

Twilight had by this time given place to darkness, still the forms of the two horse-thieves were plainly outlined against the sky, which retained faint traces of the departed sun's glory. Directly toward them the awful form advanced with huge bounds.

The swinging torch played with alternate light and shadow upon its features. Horror upon horror! it was the head of a wolf upon the shoulders of a man. And yet it was a human being. In some countries such monstrosities as this seemed to be, are killed at their birth; this fearful half-man, half-wolf and wholly crazed being had lived, to become an especial terror to the settlers of the Kentucky hills.

Now the creature was seen among the Cumberland mountains, and then, after an interval of months, it would appear hundreds of miles away, at the further end of the State. Strangely enough the Fire Wolf had never been known to injure an honest man, although all feared the horrible creature. Of late, however, it had hovered around the Blue Ridge. Whether Dare-Devil Dick or any of his gang of desperadoes had ever

given the monster cause for hatred, was not known, but the man-wolf seemed bent upon their utter extermination.

This was the fearful apparition that burst upon the vision of the appalled couple standing upon the rocks. Fire Wolf was not twenty yards away and approaching with the greatest rapidity, leaping over the ground like some winged fury.

For a few seconds both horse-thieves seemed paralyzed with fear. They could neither move nor utter a word. Their breath came in short, quick gasps.

Yellow Yute was the first to regain the use of his limbs. At the same time his voice seemed to come back. Uttering a cry in which both horror and terror were plainly defined, he dashed madly away, regardless of the many impediments to his progress that threatened to thoroughly demolish him.

His companion seemed to be more fully transfixed, and could not follow his example for perhaps ten seconds. Fatal hesitation! The man-wolf was upon him before he had gone twenty feet. Yellow Yute, fleeing for life, glanced over his shoulder at this instant. He saw something gleam in the blaze of the torch carried by the awful figure, and the loud shriek that immediately rung out, told him that his friend had met his fate.

Fire Wolf seemed to look about him as if searching for the other horse-thief. Then, after giving utterance to an eldritch shriek, the creature bounded away, waving aloft his torch, and passing within a few yards of the terrified scoundrel, who crouched down among the bushes.

Yellow Yute was the only man who had seen the face of Fire Wolf and lived to tell it; nor did he hunger to see it again.

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNINVITED GUEST IN THE MOUNTAIN RANCH.

"DEATH and destruction! what is this you tell me? Just a minute ago Blue Bob reported the killing of Pierre and the best man I had, in spite of his name, Worthless Walt. Now you say Big Hank Dolce has gone under. That hunter means to clean us out, I reckon."

"The hunter what gave it to Hank ain't the stranger you mean, Cap'n Dick; but one what's been in this very ranch, and laid his man on the floor, yonder."

"Ha! you mean that devil?"

"I reckon he must belong thar. At any rate Fire Wolf's abroad again. We're going one by one. Thar was a time, and not so many months ago either, when we numbered fourteen all told. How many can we muster now?"

"Eight," came the reply.

"Six gone, and this wolf-devil has killed four. Captain Dick, this monster's got a spite ag'in' our crowd. Have we ever done anything ag'in' it? I don't remember."

"Nor do I. My opinion is that we have a crazy monster, half-man and half-brute to fight. He hates us, that is certain; as for the reason we care little for that. Some day—but never mind, I will tell you when the time comes. How now, Abe, you have news?" interrogatively.

It was a ranch among the Kentucky mountains in which this conversation took place. The building was formed of logs, and built in a canyon, so that any one going through the main pass would fail to discover it unless his attention had already been directed in that direction. This position had been selected mainly because there happened to be a large cavity in the walls of the canyon, which at a glance the horse-thieves saw would prove to be the very thing for their stolen booty.

Here, in this mountain fortress they had lived for years undiscovered. Time had served to render the men bold and reckless, until they felt certain that the settlers would never muster courage enough to assault them in their den. And they were quite right. But for the leadership of Rattling Rube, and the accumulation of aggravating acts, the farmers would have thought their work well done after the killing of the two horse-thieves in the forest and never considered such a dangerous project as tracking the tiger of the border into his very lair. The time for action had come.

The man whom Dare-Devil Dick addressed as Abe, was a thick-set fellow with an evil, hairy face and hands. Every sentence he uttered was highly embellished with exclamations, the peculiar construction of which would have puzzled the dictionary-makers.

What this uncouth fellow had to communicate was of the greatest importance. The Regulators had been seen half an hour before sundown, within a few miles of the mountains. It looked as though they meant business.

Dare-Devil Dick became excited. His orders came fast and furious, but they were clearly given. Two men were dispatched to guard the canyon, so that surprise would be utterly out of the question. A third vanished inside the cavern of the "ranch."

Gathering the remainder of his band around him, the chief discussed plans for their future movements. Granting that the infuriated Regulators did cause them to vacate their mountain retreat, they had the means of making good their escape, and there were many other places equally as secure where they might soon be in hiding.

For this one night then they could laugh at their foes, and it was resolved to make merry. A small keg of fine liquor was tapped, and the six men proceeded to "enjoy life," as they looked at it.

It was a wild orgie. They had drawn the four chairs that the ranch contained, up to a solid table, at least it looked solid enough, although in the end it proved treacherous. The captain and Yellow Yute sat side by side upon a bench. Each man held a tumbler, which made frequent trips to the jug. This latter in its turn was supplied from the fountain head, the keg.

Yellow Yute was entertaining them with a vivid description of his late experience. That the story contained much to interest his hearers, one could determine from their spell-bound attitude, and the mechanical manner in which they emptied and filled their glasses without taking their eyes from the face of the speaker. Under the influence of the liquor, the lately-scared horse-thief waxed garrulous. He was in the midst of a glowing description of the terrible demon. His yellow face actually shone with excitement.

At this moment occurred a startling interruption. Never did a man enter a house in a stranger way. First the sound of falling dirt was heard on the roof; then came a resounding thump. The rotten boards gave way, and as the six horse-thieves sprung erect, a man shot down through the roof, upsetting the table, and rolling over Abe and Yellow Yute. It was the comrade of Rattling Rube, the wolf-scalper.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HUNTER SCOUTS.

"Hist! down with ye!"

It was Rattling Rube who spoke these words in a whisper. Both of the men crouched close to the ground. They were in the main canyon, two-thirds of the way up the mountain. The Regulators had gone into camp in a gulch at the foot of the great hill, intending to continue their man-hunt on the morrow, but after supper had been dispatched, Rattling Rube announced his determination of taking a scout up the mountain, with his friend for company. A code of signals was agreed upon with Wildcat Turner, and then the two hunters departed.

It was Rube who caught a glimpse of danger in their path, and directed the attention of his companion to the place. The night was not pitch-dark, although a person's movements might be invisible to the sight thirty feet away. Rube's young companion soon saw what was pointed out to him. A small red speck glowed and died away at intervals. An observer less suspicious might have taken it for a star.

"What is it?" asked his companion.

"Take a whiff o' air," came the whispered reply.

"Ah! I see," returned the other, after doing so; "a cigar, and a deuced good one at that. These fellows are high-toned."

"Easy enough to be that on other people's money," said Rube.

"What are you going to do about it?"

Rube thought for several minutes. It was evident, from the low voices that reached their ears, that more than one man occupied the canyon above. The canyon was too narrow to admit of their going by without discovery. Ah! the wall. Rube remembered that a dozen yards back it was very low and could easily be sealed. Suppose they try it? His plan was quickly communicated to his companion, who readily agreed to it.

A few minutes later and they were ascending the wall. It was not difficult work in itself, but they had to be very cautious for fear of drawing the attention of the sentries who guarded the canyon.

After gaining the top of the bank, they began to move slowly upward. Soon the low mutmur of human voices could be heard; they were passing the sentries. It would have been easy work to have crawled forward and listened to what they were saying, but they had no desire for the information, intending to hunt up the king-pin of the lot.

After getting some distance beyond the spot where the guards seemed to be stationed Rube announced that he intended going down into the canyon again, and scout up it a little distance, while his companion could rest where he was. Another instant and he had vanished from view, going over the edge with the dexterity of a circus acrobat.

The young hunter sat down on a rock to wait.

What his relations with the prince of horse-thieves were, that could make Wildcat Turner look upon him with such respect, the reader will in due time discover. He was not an old friend of Rattling Rube's by any means. Their friendship could only date a few weeks back, but it had a secure foundation. Rattling Rube was on his way to Kentucky for reasons of his own, and had reached Cincinnati. Possessed of considerable money, he had sported it around the hotel at which he was stopping, as no cautious man would have thought of doing.

The result of this was that he fell into the hands of sharpers, who proposed to get him to drinking, and by slipping a drug into his liquor, to benumb his faculties that he could be robbed with impunity. They were very nearly successful at their rascally work,

Although a master hand, generally speaking, at reading faces, Rube was eventually induced to drink. In a short time the drug began to have its effects upon him. The two sharps had him in a dark street. They tried their best to get him to the house they had in view, but the drug worked too rapidly, and they found that it would be necessary to carry him bodily or else accomplish their object in the street.

This latter was by far the easiest, and they went to work without delay. Rattling Rube was in the strangest, if not the most dangerous situation of his life. His mind was not benumbed, only his limbs. He could see and understand what was going on, but could not lift a hand to prevent it. As to shouting and giving the alarm, that was rendered impossible by the fact that one of the land-pirates had clasped his throat in a vise-like gripe, choking the loud cry he had attempted to utter.

It happened, however, that a young man came out of a house close by, at this instant. Attracted by the gurgling cry, he turned his eyes upon the struggling forms. In an instant he comprehended the matter. One of the rascals was sent into the gutter by a terrific blow straight from the shoulder, and the other picked up bodily and tumbled down a flight of stairs into a dark cellar-way.

From that hour the two men were the best of friends, and in subsequent conversations they discovered that their paths ran together in the future. Some mutual confidences then followed, and the result was that when Rattling Rube placed his foot on Kentucky's soil, he had a companion whose cause had been made his own.

The young man sat where his friend had left him, for some time, thinking of his closeness to the object of his search, and wondering in what manner he should face Dare-Devil Dick.

A sound suspiciously like laughter aroused him. It came from a point directly in front of him; the sentries were on his right hand. Determined to know what this meant, he arose and cautiously made his way forward.

After five minutes had been consumed in picking his way among bowlders and bushes, he found himself on the edge of a ravine. One wall, that on which he stood, descended abruptly. Directly below him he could see several long spears of light. Puzzled, he bent over to examine into the matter more closely.

Fatal move! The treacherous earth gave way. Vainly he tried to save himself. Down went the young fellow, crashing upon the rotten boards. Shooting through the roof, he landed upon the table. Even this article seemed possessed, for it also gave way. What

an apparition for the startled horse-thieves to witness! A comet would not have startled them more.

CHAPTER VIII.

A PRINCE OF HORSE-THIEVES.

It was Abe's first impression that the heavens had fallen, and that they were to be crushed under the roof like so many eggshells. He had been sent backward several feet and fell prone on his back, where he lay, kicking wildly.

Yellow Yute had gone down flat. In the very midst of his terrible experience with Fire Wolf, fancy his alarm at such an interruption! But the young hunter was just as much surprised as any of them. The table had fallen over, and thrown him directly at the feet of Dare-Devil Dick, who had leaped erect at the first alarm.

The young adventurer's hat had fallen off, and as he scrambled to his feet he came face to face with the prince of horse-thieves, not two feet separating them! It was a perfect tableau. The men stood as if made of marble, gazing into each other's faces, and with the light of recognition in their eyes.

The young man's features clearly expressed satisfaction; while Dare-Devil Dick, than whom there never lived a more reckless rascal, seemed to actually shrink before the other's gaze.

For at least half a minute they stood thus, during which Abe managed to gain his footing. Dare-Devil Dick's face had gradually become ghastly pale, as he felt the blazing orbs of the hunter fastened upon him.

As if unable to stand it any longer, he held up a hand, warning the other away.

"For Heaven's sake tell me, are you living or dead?" he cried.

"Had your foul plot succeeded, Dick Darke, I should have been under ground by this time. But it failed, and I am here to seek satisfaction of you. I demand that you tell me where I can find my own."

"Your own? What am I to know of that?" muttered the other.

"You know whom I seek. I have sworn to find her if it took my lifetime. Again I ask, where is Madge Harrison? Attempt not to deceive me, or I will have your life."

Dare-Devil Dick's handsome face grew livid.

"Fool!" he muttered, between his teeth.

The young man was becoming more excited every moment.

"Do you hear me, Dick Darke? So surely as you stand there I will take your life if you have harmed as much as a hair of my Madge's head. You sneer; I can see the evil look on your face. Ha! devil, I shall tear your heart out!"

The frenzied man made a panther like leap forward, and in another instant both he and the prince of horse-thieves were struggling furiously for the mastery.

Rattling Rube's young friend was a strong man, and his natural agility was now aided by burning anger; but, as the reader knows, he had a modern Hercules pitted against him.

How the fight would have ended cannot be decided, for both men possessed qualities that should have brought victory; the young fellow—right and furious anger; Dare-Devil Dick that power—might.

At a word from the horse-thief chief two of the men sprung forward and seized hold of his opponent. Between them, he was dragged back, and there he stood, panting heavily and glaring in the face of his enemy.

"Harm him not, on your lives, men. Now listen to me, Duke Spencer. I wish you no evil, and never have. True, I hold your affianced a prisoner here; but, as Heaven is my judge, no harm has ever come to her. My sister has been her companion all the time, and you know Kitty well enough to make sure that Madge is not dying with solitude. I shall keep her here until the old man agrees to my proposal. It is now my only hope; lose this hold upon him and I lose all."

"Dick Darke, I must believe you speak the truth. You were never a bad man, although a bold, and, sometimes thought, a cruel one. You have almost ruined three lives to further your own plans. What has Madge or I ever done to you?"

"Nothing," answered Dick composedly; "you owe all of your trouble to Madge's uncle. Let him agree to my terms, and no one will be more pleased to see you and Madge married than myself. True, I asked for her hand, myself, some years ago, but she had met you and I was respectfully declined, but I never took it to heart. You have been searching for me for many months, and it seems found me at last, by what manner of means I cannot even guess."

"What do you intend doing with me?" asked Duke Spencer.

"Keep you a prisoner. You have come into my net, and there you must remain. Birds of a feather flock together. Who knows but what I shall have the old man to entertain next?"

"Who knows?" muttered Duke; then aloud he added: "I warn you that I shall try to escape, and shall show you no mercy, Dick Darke, should the fortune of war place you in my power. Now do what you will, but be careful, for there is one on your track whom you fear worse than death."

"Ah!" cried the horse-thief, starting as if

an adder had stung him, and turning almost fiercely upon the young man; "you know more than you will tell. Who is it?"

"That I shall not say. I don't think that he wishes you to know, but he bears you a deadly hate, and he intends paying the interest in full," answered the other.

"I understand now. It is the hunter. Fool that I was not to think of Rube Rand when I heard who led the Regulators. You are right; he has cause to hate me. I wronged him long ago, and when we meet one of us dies. I have no desire to take his life, but intend to defend my own. I wish you no harm, Duke, but you have put your foot into my den, and for fear of the consequences, must be kept secure until the terms I proposed to the old man are agreed upon. Take him away, boys, to the strong room. I depend on you. Let your lives answer for his security."

The young hunter was led through a hole in the rocky wall of the canyon. One of the men carried a lantern. Five minutes later, Duke Spencer, stripped of his weapons, found himself in what the horse-thieves delighted to call their strong room. This was simply a deep niche in the side of the passage, in front of which stout planks formed the fourth wall.

CHAPTER IX.

UNDER GROUND.

DARKNESS, gloomy and impenetrable, surrounded Duke Spencer. His was not the nature to give up to anything. So long as there was life there was hope.

What brought him here on the track of Dare-Devil Dick, can be explained very easily. The niece of Colonel Sacketts had suddenly disappeared from her home in Ohio. She was known to be an heiress in her own right, and it was generally supposed that when the colonel died, she would come in for most of his property, quite an extensive estate, by the way.

Various conjectures were formed as to her sudden disappearance. Some went so far as to confidently assert that she had fled with a lover against whom her guardian was prejudiced.

The colonel knew it was worse than this. He immediately sent for Duke Spencer, telegraphing that it was a matter of life and death. The young man was an army officer, stationed on some fort on the border. He made all haste to Ohio.

Before his arrival the matter was explained. Colonel Sacketts received a letter postmarked Cincinnati, from one whom he had good cause to remember. Dick Darke acknowledged the abduction, declared that Madge was in a safe place where they could

never find her, and where she would remain until his terms were agreed to. As it happened that these terms presented many points that Colonel Sacketts could not accomplish, even by ruining himself, but which the obstinate enemy swore he must do if he ever hoped to see his niece again, they were in despair.

Time was asked to arrange matters, and the kidnapper said they could take all they wanted, as he was safe and in no hurry, having other fish to fry. At the same time he assured them of his honest intentions. No harm had befallen Madge, nor did he intend that any should.

Months had flown by since then. The keenest detectives on the force had taken hold of the case and been baffled. When almost ready to give up in despair, Major Spencer happened to materially aid a man who had gotten himself into trouble, and who sent for him. Duke managed to effect his discharge, and as a reward received information relative to Dare-Devil Dick that served to put him on the track. The man had until lately been one of the horse-thieves, but had deserted, and was believed to have fallen under Fire Wolf's savage blade.

The night after he had heard this great news, Duke Spencer fell in with Rattling Rube as has been related.

To return again to the imprisoned young soldier.

The footsteps of the two men died away in the passage, and he could no longer see the light from their lantern through the cracks in the door. Duke wasted no time in thought. When Rattling Rube fitted him out in this hunter costume, he supplied him with many things that might be needed in the future.

That future had now come.

Although the horse-thieves had taken his belt and the weapons it contained, they had not searched him, for the simple reason that the chief seemed to bear him no ill will, and might resent any impudence shown the daring assailant.

Duke soon had a small candle lighted with which he set about examining his quarters. A short survey convinced him that his only hope of escape lay in the wall just where the woodwork joined the rocks. This was strong enough to resist any effort made by the naked fingers, but the soldier produced a short, serviceable knife from some secret receptacle where Rube had stowed it away for just such an emergency.

With this blade he attacked the spot which appeared to be the least strong. A short time served to make quite an impression, and in half an hour he could poke his head through the hole he had made. Duke had blown out his precious candle as soon as he started work,

for he might find a much better use for it in the future.

At length he determined that he had worked long enough, so he started to ascertain if his work was satisfactory. Being rather a slim man, proved of material advantage to him.

Another minute and the major was not to be found in the boasted strong room of the horse-thieves' ranch. He stood in the passage without. A little reflection told him in what direction he should go in order to reach the cabin, for he remembered that the door had been on his left when he first saw it.

Duke turned his face directly the other way. He desired to go anywhere but to the ranch, for such a move, in his present defenseless condition, he thought, would have been the height of foolishness.

Before him stretched a space as dark as Erebus. Every step he took had to be carefully considered, and before he had gone twenty paces, Duke concluded that this uncertainty of what lay before him, was trying enough to make a man go crazy. What he needed, was some light on the subject.

In making the hole which had proved the means of his egress from the prison into which he had been thrust, Duke had cut off several long splinters of wood. These he had retained in his hand as a sort of cane with which to feel his way. They could now be put to a much better use.

Striking a match he applied the light to the point of a splinter, and was delighted to see the wood spring into a clear blaze. His surroundings were now clearly defined. The rocky roof was some ten feet in height. On either hand ran the parallel lines of wall, along which he had been feeling his way so carefully. Now, that he could see where he was going, Duke's spirits began to rise. His pace was also quickened, as the danger of falling into unknown depths no longer existed. He had left the prison from which his escape had been effected, some sixty yards behind him, when his eyes fell upon a rough door similar to that connected with the strong room.

At the sight of this, Duke's heart beat tumultuously. He remembered what the horse-thief chief had said about having Madge in a place of security, and his hand trembled violently as he laid it on the heavy bar that secured the door.

Summoning all his resolution, he pulled back the bar. The door slowly opened. Holding his rude torch aloft, Duke strode into the space that was partitioned off from the passage.

It was lighted up by a lamp. His eyes caught two girlish forms seated on a soft couch. Then he uttered a cry, and dropping

his torch sprung toward them. One shrunk away; the other defiantly faced him, her little form drawn up. This was Dick Darke's sister.

"How dare you?" she demanded; "my brother shall hear of this outrage. Your life shall be the penalty."

"I will have *his* life if we meet again. Madge, oh! Madge, don't you know me, darling?"

A cry rung out.

"It's Duke! It's my Duke! Thank God!" and in another instant his arms were around her, full of love and tenderness, holding her tight, tight to his heart.

"Major Spencer, and here!" exclaimed the other young girl.

"Yes, Kitty, it is Duke Spencer. Where else should he be but with the idol of his heart?" said the young man.

"But my brother Dick? Where is he?" cried the girl, her face blanching to a deathly white.

The sisterly love of this little woman had restrained Dick's wild spirit on many an occasion. It was his redeeming trait.

"I was taken prisoner and shut up, but escaped from the strong room. Your brother is safe so far, but there is no telling how long he will be, as the Regulators, led by a man he fears, Rube Rand, are close at hand."

"Rube Rand here!" murmured Kitty.

"Darling," said the major, turning to Madge, "I have been nigh distracted by your loss. We will get out of this hole, and be in safety before many hours."

"Don't count your chickens before they're hatched, my covey. Now, what do you think of that for a tableau, ladies?"

Turning at the sound of this rough voice, they saw that which made the two girls tremble with apprehension.

CHAPTER X.

HOW YELLOW YUTE WENT UNDER.

A BRAWNY man stood just inside the doorway. His right hand was extended, and held a shining revolver in its grasp, which dangerous toy was aimed full at the major. In the other hand he carried an extinguished lantern.

It was Yellow Yute, the companion of the ill-fated Big Hank Dolce, who had fallen beneath the thirsty knife of the wood-demon. His evil, parchment-colored face was aglow with a sneering smile. The horse-thief did not know of Duke's escape. He was moving along the passage when the light coming from the open door attracted his attention. What was his amazement upon seeing the very man they had put into the strong room not two hours before, with the captain's hos-

tage in his arms, as if he never meant to let her go again.

The major's words explained what mystery there might have been about it, and then it was that the fellow had put in the disclaimer that had so startled our young folks.

Duke Spencer had seen service; he was not as young as he looked, and had earned his rank by hard fighting. It may be supposed then, that having often supped with death, so to speak, he was not afraid of the old gentleman, when he presented himself in the shape of a revolver.

Duke was surprised at the sudden interruption, and perhaps not a little angry. His first impulse therefore was to leap at the fellow. But he was prevented from doing this by several reasons. Madge's arms were clasped around his neck, as if she divined his reckless intention. Then he saw the fellow would certainly discharge his pistol, and the bullet must go somewhere. Perhaps it might miss him, only to find a lodging in the body of her whom he loved far better than life.

A shudder ran through him at the thought. Yellow Yute had lowered the weapon, but it was still ready for instant use, and Duke dared make no movement.

"Ha! ha! ha! In a trap, my fine young hunter! Now I wonder whether it is best to shoot you down where you stand, or just put a bullet in each arm," and the brute laughed horribly, not a shadow of his terrible impending fate touching on his mind.

The major felt that dear form tremble for his safety. He knew this was sheer cruelty on the man's part, and hastened to reassure Madge, telling her that Dare-Devil Dick had sworn he would shoot the man who laid violent hands on him without just cause.

It was while he was speaking, and Yellow Yute leering horribly at them, that Duke felt something touch his hand. In another instant he had grasped a small silver-mounted revolver. Madge had received it from Kitty's brother, with instructions to use it if any one insulted her, himself included. Duke could but feel more lenient toward the chief of the horse-thieves when he realized the good luck that had come to them.

But the tiny revolver was fated not to be used; at least this time.

Just at this instant Madge's face became as white as snow. Her eyes were distended with an expression of terror.

"The monster! Oh! Duke," and she fainted in his arms. Yellow Yute was a trifle vain of his ugliness. He actually thought his frightful grimaces had caused this swoon. Duke Spencer and Kitty knew better. They saw a fearful figure rising up just behind the chuckling horse-thief, a form the sight of

which was calculated to give one ugly dreams for a lifetime. It was a gigantic man having a wolf's head. In one hand he carried a half-burned torch; the other held a knife, on which the dried blood could be seen.

It was Fire Wolf, the scourge of the horse-thieves.

Yellow Yute was brought down from the realms of bliss into which his vanity had taken him, by a touch on the shoulder. He looked down and saw the end of a partially burned torch. Then his form turned on a pivot, and he saw—great Heavens! the wretched man stood as if frozen for a space and then his knees giving way, he sunk down in the most abject manner possible. The terror that had assailed him when he saw his comrade, Hank Dolce, struck down by that red knife was comparatively tame when placed in relation with his present feeling.

What the doomed wretch saw in his mind during the few seconds that intervened before his fate was sealed, no one ever knew, but his yellow face blanched to a deathly color, and his eyes shone with a horrified glare, as if the trooping ghosts of past crimes were thronging his brain.

Major Spencer stood spell-bound. The terrible scene had completely fascinated him, and had the fate of the world depended upon his movement, he could not have made one.

Madge lay senseless in his arms, held close to his breast, while Kitty Darke crouched behind him, her horrified eyes fastened upon the monstrous figure that had so suddenly appeared.

For perhaps ten seconds of time each party stood as if made of stone. Yellow Yute had sunk to his knees. His eyes were glued upon the demon. He had the appearance of one whose breast had lost the last vestige of hope.

All at once the singular tableau was disturbed.

A low growl or moaning sound came from the man-wolf, not unlike the utterance of the animal he represented. At the same instant he made a move forward.

No one knew better than the horse-thief what was coming, and yet he made no attempt to ward off the blow. He glared into the blood-shot eyes of the Fire Wolf, charmed as a bird might be by a rattlesnake, only that he was far from resembling the innocent little feathered songster.

Major Spencer drew a quick breath.

His soldier eye detected the quivering of the blade, and he knew that in another instant all would be over. He was correct in his surmise. The knife descended as would a thunderbolt from heaven. Mortal eye could not have followed its passage.

Duke saw it still raised aloft, and then, like lightning, it was transferred to the

horse-thief's back, the point protruding from his breast. Even in death the horror that had seized upon him seemed to render Yellow Yute speechless, for not a sound broke from his lips.

The blow was followed by instantaneous death. Duke saw the head fall back, and he knew Yellow Yute was no more.

Fire Wolf, with an exertion of his strength, pulled the knife from its sheath in the horse-thief's body. Then, apparently without noticing the others, he swung his seemingly dead torch around his head until it burst into a bright flame.

Duke had raised his little revolver, holding it in readiness to fire should the fearful figure threaten them, but without even a glance in their direction, Fire Wolf bounded into the passage, and was quickly lost to view.

CHAPTER XI.

RATTLING RUBE ON HAND.

RATTLING RUBE found some little difficulty in making his way down the wall of the canyon. In the daytime the task would have been easy enough, but now he had two things to guard against, the darkness and nearness of his enemies.

Being an experienced hand at such business, Rube managed to gain the bed of the canyon without betraying himself. This accomplished, he stood very quiet and listened. Above him all was quiet, for his young companion had seated himself upon a rock and was engaged in thought.

Rube began making his way up the canyon. This proved a laborious task, for all around him was pitchy darkness. The walls, rising up on either side, cast their united gloomy shadows into the pass, and at times the ranger had to actually grope his way along. It may be supposed, then, under these circumstances, that it was an easy thing for Rube to miss seeing the narrow opening that led to the smaller canyon in which the horse-thieves had built their ranch.

After going quite a distance upward, and seeing no signs of the enemy, Rube determined that scouting in the darkness, without any idea of how the land lay, was something that he had no love for.

In considerable ill-humor, he started to return. He had gotten just opposite the narrow opening, of which mention has been made, when a strange sound assailed his ears. It was, as the reader has perhaps guessed, Major Spencer, making his *début* among the horse-thieves in his own original fashion.

But Rattling Rube knew nothing of this. He heard the heavy crash, and at once crouched down, swinging his heavy rifle

around to bear upon the point from whence came the racket. Following it he heard human voices raised in dispute, but at that distance could not recognize his friend's tones.

"Must be breaking up housekeeping," muttered the ranger, as he pulled his long mustache, reflectively.

Complete silence had now come upon the place.

Rattling Rube was badly puzzled; moreover he was curious.

"What in the dickens could that have been?" he asked himself. Then he laughed. It was one of his characteristics, this laugh. There was something so pleasant and musical about it, a peculiar charm that made one wish to hear it again.

"Mahomet won't get the mountain to come to him, that's sure. Reckon he'll have to stir his stumps. What's this? A passage, I declare. Ah! ha! I smell a mouse. Careful's the word now, friend of my youth, and forward we go. Easy now, easy."

Cautiously he made his way along the passage, which grew gradually wider until it debouched into the second canyon. Rattling Rube had taken some time to make the trip. When he caught sight of the lighted window of the ranch he halted to reconnoiter, being a cautious man in spite of his name.

When assured that all was quiet, he began moving forward, very careful to keep away from the broad spear of light coming from the slit in that side of the ranch toward him. He could see moving figures inside, but found it hard work to gain a position where he could observe them without being himself liable to discovery.

When at length his eyes fell upon Dare-Devil Dick, a something broke from between his set teeth, that was marvelously like an oath. Probably the scout had good cause to hate the handsome leader of the horse-thieves.

His emotion almost got the better of him. Twice was that long rifle brought up to his shoulder, and as many times did he glance along the shining barrel, (for the light from the window and open door served to dispel the darkness in some degree.) But both times Rattling Rube seemed to give way to second consideration, for he lowered the gun and shook his head in a negative way.

Dare-Devil Dick had no idea how close he was to death just then. He was playing cards with three of his men. Yellow Yute was not to be seen. Over in a corner sat a form that seemed familiar to Rube even though he cast but a fleeting glance at it. Soon, however, he looked again. The face was now to be seen. He knew it instantly.

"The reptile," the ranger muttered.

It was Tom Crawley, the man whom the hunters had rescued from the living grave in which he had been placed by the Regulators, who of course supposed that he was dead mutton by this time. Tom had become a grave man, having lost all the jollity for which he had once been noted.

Dare-Devil Dick was well named.

He knew that danger surrounded him on all sides. To fall into the hands of the Vigilantes meant death, for Wildcat Turner headed them. Then he also knew he had an inveterate enemy close at hand in the person of Rube Rand. Perhaps after all Dick had more of a suspicion in regard to his danger than he has been given credit for, but if this was true, he was truly the prince of reckless men, for he laughed and joked with his men, as if an army of friends surrounded him.

Rattling Rube crouched beside the open door. Had one of the horse-thieves come out they could hardly have failed seeing him, but for this the scout cared little. One whom he had sought far and long, was in sight, and Rube was fast losing the discretion that usually characterized his movements.

The leader of the horse thieves was not ten feet away from the hunter, although sitting with his side toward him. Rube's eyes were fixed upon his face; he had ears for nothing beyond what they were talking about at the table.

"And so he's hunted you ever since?" one of the men was saying.

"Ever since," replied Dare-Devil Dick; "that was the only thing I've ever had sincere regrets about. Rube Rand hates me worse than poison; it isn't in him to forgive a wrong like that, and when we meet, the probability is that one of us will go under."

"You bet," muttered the unseen listener.

"Well, there'll be a fine show when the fight comes off, if what you tell us about this fellow be true, Dick. Count me in for a sight," laughed Blue Bob.

"If these Regulators leave anything of you to be counted in. Between them they seem determined to wipe us off the face of the earth," and Dick shook his head significantly.

The man snapped his fingers in derision.

"That for your Regulators. I've seen them before. They make a big show, but do mighty little," said Bob.

"And Fire Wolf?" asked the other interrogatively.

Blue Bob's face changed color.

"There you have me, boss. I fear no man as long as I can see him, but there ain't one of us that has ever set eyes on that devil. If I go under, something tells me 'twill be by his knife. But, be he man or beast, Blue

Bob of Kentucky will make a fight for it, even though it should turn out to be Old Nick himself. Them's my sentiments."

"And so this critter ye speak of is leading the Regs?" said Abe, whom we have noticed before.

"You heard what Major Spencer said," returned the chief.

"Hal! what does he mean by that?" muttered Rube; "how does he know we are here? There's a mystery under it."

He would undoubtedly have heard enough to explain the matter if he had remained undisturbed for five minutes longer; but it was not so fated.

In his eagerness to hear all that was said, Rube had leaned forward. None of those at the rude table saw him, but another pair of eyes did. Deeply interested, now that the name of his companion was mentioned, Rattling Rube had ears for nothing else. He did not hear the soft, catlike footfalls just behind him, and the first intimation he had of danger was when a pair of hands struck him square between the shoulders.

Such was the force of the shove, that he was pushed more than half-way across the room, bringing up at length against a keg that had once contained brandy. Together they rolled upon the floor and vanished from view in the opening to the cavern. The horse-thieves bounded to their feet as though on springs.

CHAPTER XII.

DARE-DEVIL DICK'S TRUSTY FRIENDS.

"DEATH and furies! what does this mean?" shouted Dare-Devil Dick, as he stood with a pistol in his hand.

The entrance of the hunter had been at once so unexpected and sudden, that none of the men had obtained a good glance of him.

They knew a human form had flitted before their eyes, and vanished in the gloom of the cavern, but whether a man or a boy, black or white, in rags or well-dressed, none could say.

Dare-Devil Dick was the first to break the silence, and this he did by demanding to know what it meant. The others also turned toward the open doorway. A man was entering, his face set in a fearful grin that stretched a horribly large mouth from ear to ear.

"Didn't I send him in slick, cap'n?" he asked, as soon as his muscles came under control.

"Who was it, what was it, and where did you find him?"

The man with the big mouth seemed in no wise put out by this flood of questions; but began tallying upon his fingers.

"Who was it? I don't know. What was

it? A man dressed like a hunter; one of them blessed Regs, I reckon. What was he a-doing? Why, peepin' in at the door thar, his eyes on you, cap'n, and a-fingerin' the lock of his gun as if he wouldn't mind giving ye the contents free of charge."

A man dressed like a hunter!

That was enough for the chief. The color forsook his cheeks; but he set his teeth hard and frowned to hide his pallor.

"Fiends take it! I told you he would be our death yet. It's that meddling Rube Rand," he exclaimed, furiously.

"Just so," came in measured tones behind him.

Turning with the rapidity of a flash, the chief saw a sight that would have made any man, bold though he might be, feel sort of shaky about the knees.

There stood his inveterate foe, the only person on earth whom the reckless horse-thief acknowledged having a fear for. His head was bent forward, and his eyes glanced along the gleaming barrel of his rifle. Dare-Devil Dick did not need a very fine perception to tell him that the terrible weapon was bearing full upon his breast. A slight touch of the finger and he would be hurled into eternity.

Rattling Rube had not been thrown into the depths of the cavern, wholly by the push given him by the horse-thief. In stumbling over the brandy keg he received an additional momentum. Besides this, his quick eye detected the black hole, and like a flash he seemed to understand that he would fare better in there than with his enemies. So that his plunge into the darkness was partly voluntary.

But no sooner had he vanished from view of the astonished horse-thieves than he was on his feet, but little the worse for his rough experience. He immediately pulled back the hammer of his rifle, which he had clung to tenaciously all this time.

"Just so," said he, in confirmation of the chief's words, as he stepped into view, the long rifle at his shoulder.

Silence fell upon the party.

It was an imposing tableau: one man defying six, and without the least particle of fear. And well each one of the horse-thieves knew that if one of them drew a weapon or made a movement, their leader was a dead man.

"I have you just where I want you, Dick Darke. I have searched for you these three years back. It seemed a hopeless task, but when Rube Rand sets about doing anything, nothing short of death can stop him. You did me a grievous injury. I was your friend, trusted in you, and was betrayed. You acknowledge it?"

Dare-Devil Dick said never a word, but nodded his head.

"I swore a solemn oath that living or dead I would find you, and if possible, avenge my wrongs. Well, you are found; I am here. Are you ready to go?" sternly said the trapper.

"Wait; I have something to say. You think you will fire; I know you will not," returned the chief without a flinch.

"As cool as ever. You seem to know better than I do. This has been a pet scheme of mine for long, weary years. Do you think I will be cheated out of my prey? I will give you a minute to speak on," said Rattling Rube.

"Very well. In the first place then, I know you can send me out of this world in a hurry. I do not forget your qualities with the rifle. But my dear fellow, it would be the signal for your own doom. Before the echoes of you, shot would die away, while my form was yet writhing on the floor here, yours would be beside it. Here are five trusty friends of mine, whose revolvers would sound your death-knell in a twinkling. Do you admit it?"

"Granted; but my object would be obtained. I never was a coward; you are well aware of that. If you can give no better reason why I should withhold my fire than that, you had better say your prayers, for the minute's up, and Dick Darke, your time has come," saying which the hunter made as if to fire.

"Half a moment more, and I am done. There is another reason why you will not fire. Do you think Kitty would ever marry the man who slew her brother, much as she loved him?"

The shot told, as wily Dick meant it should.

"What! do you mean to say Kitty ever cared for me?"

"Of course she did. You were a fool not to see it."

"But she ran away from me," persisted Rube, now off his guard.

"That was my doing, Rube. See here and I'll explain how the little fool cried, and told me how she loved you, and how I tricked her into believing you had run away with another girl."

Having attracted the hunter's attention in this way, Dare-Devil Dick saw his chance and used it. The rifle had fallen a trifle. He gave one splendid leap, landing fully ten feet away. The gun cracked almost instantly, and the bullet raised a welt along the body of the chief, but, having suffered himself to be taken unawares, Rattling Rube had not done himself justice, which fact was appreciated by the prince of horse-thieves.

Dare-Devil Dick had held a pistol in his hand through the whole of this interesting conversation, which, however, he had been prevented from using by the suggestive way in which Rube pointed his rifle. His weapon was now rendered useless.

The spiteful crack of the horse-thief's revolver now sounded. Dare-devil Dick was forced to fire. Through the smoke that followed Rube's shot he caught a glimpse of the hunter coming toward him.

There were five other men in the ranch, and yet not one of them raised a weapon. Whether they were paralyzed with fear or that the appearance of the hunter had thoroughly demoralized them, can never be fully known. Even the chief was not himself.

Rattling Rube's idea was to make his escape. He had just fired and missed. Besides, although he would hardly have acknowledged it to himself, what the handsome chief had said about his sister had touched the one tender spot in Rube's heart, and some of his vindictive hatred against Dick was gone.

Had the latter suffered him to depart in peace, his men would have fared much better. They stood, with the exception of Tom Crawley, between the hunter and the open door. Naturally, however, Dare-Devil Dick thought the hunter intended carrying out, by a direct assault, what his bullet had failed to do.

So he hastily discharged his revolver, and then threw himself flat upon the floor, rolling over and over with great agility until he was at least ten feet from the scene of his ignominy.

Rube did not stop to inquire who had fired. He heard the ball whiz by within an inch of his face, and saw his passage to the outer regions blocked by the horse-thieves. That was enough.

In another instant he was among them. Blue Bob was the first to suffer. He went down like an ox in the shambles, felled by a terrible blow from the hunter's fist. Probably he thought an earthquake must have occurred for he lay quiet a long time.

Abe and the man with the monstrous mouth were seized with a sudden determination to move. The former went beside Blue Bob, while the latter shot out into the cool night air. Probably he went to laugh, but if so he took a strange method of doing it, as his comrades found him sometime later, hugging a boulder, with half a peck of gravel in his mouth.

The way being cleared Rattling Rube vanished in the darkness.

"After him!" yelled Dare-Devil Dick, leaping outside, with a double object in

view, for he thought Rube might stop to use his revolver, and the wary chief did not want to be in the illuminated ranch.

A scornful laugh was all the answer he got.

Five minutes later, while the horse-thieves were comparing damages, the distinct sound of two shots reached their ears. Shortly after, the man who had been Big Mouth's companion in the canyon, rushed into the ranch, one arm hanging bloody and useless at his side.

It was the work of Rattling Rube.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE UNDAUNTED SOLDIER.

It would be extremely hard to describe the feelings of Major Spencer when the dread form stood before him. But when Fire Wolf vanished from view, he drew a long breath of relief.

He had half raised the little revolver that Dare-Devil Dick had given to Madge, but finding no use for it he let the weapon drop, and turned his full attention to the young girl.

She had fainted dead away. The soldier was alarmed, but Kitty understood what was the matter. Under her orders Duke bore the beloved form to a lounge, and Kitty soon brought her to.

None of them had heard, or if they had, paid little heed to, the discharge of firearms, which echoed faintly through the long passages. It was Rattling Rube at work in the ranch, and what happened there the reader already knows. The major was delighted when Madge opened her eyes and smiled up at him.

"We must get out of this at once," said he; "Kitty, do you know of any other entrance than the ranch?"

The young girl replied that there certainly was one, but she had never seen it, and could no more guide them to it than fly.

"Then we shall have to trust to good-luck, that's all. Madge, you are able to walk, dear?"

"I am eager and anxious to get out of this place, and back to guardy again," said the young girl.

"We will make a brave effort to leave this place. That little toy of yours, Madge, may come in useful yet, so I will secure it," and the soldier took a step toward the little revolver, which lay just where it had fallen, in plain view.

"Halt!"

The command rung out loud and authoritative. Major Spencer knew what generally accompanied such an order. He drew up.

Dare-Devil Dick stood in the doorway, one foot advanced, his head thrown back, and a

gleaming revolver held in his right hand. There was a look in his face such as Kitty never remembered seeing there before. The same glare might befit a good-natured tiger, brought to bay by a pack of hounds.

Dare-Devil Dick seemed to be as thoroughly amazed as Yellow Yute had been. For a short time silence reigned. It was the prince of horse-thieves who broke it at length.

"Hang me if this isn't more than a joke!"

Major Spencer, despite the gravity of the situation, could not resist smiling. The other saw it and it enraged him.

"You have carried the thing too far, Duke Spencer. My men have a dislike for any one siding with those cursed Regulators, but if they saw poor Yute lying there dead, killed by your hand, even I myself would be powerless to keep their claws from tearing you to pieces. I really think it would be kind in me to fire now, and thus put it out of their power to torture you."

"You forget that I am a soldier, Darke; threats I laugh at. Then again you do us too much honor. True, that wretch was threatening me, but I had no hand in his death," said Spencer.

"I have long since cut my eye teeth; it will take a better yarn than that to deceive me," declared the other, meaningly.

"I beg your pardon, but you must be blind. If you will remember correctly, I had no knife or any weapon in fact. That man had his face toward me when he fell, and you can see that he has been stabbed in the back. I am not responsible for his death; he brought it upon himself."

"But who killed him? Not Rube Rand, for he was in the ranch a short time ago. Speak; who slew Yellow Yute?" demanded Dick.

"I know not. Never in my life have I seen such a terrible figure, and such a swift, deadly blow. It was the form of a man, a hunter, with the head of a wolf," explained the major.

The form of a man, with the head of a wolf!

"It was Fire Wolf, the scourge," cried the horse-thief.

He cast a quick glance behind him, to the right, and to the left, as though fearful lest the dread demon should suddenly appear and claim him as his next victim.

Then taking a silver whistle which hung by a cord from his neck, he blew a long, shrill, rattling note that resounded through the subterranean passages. Dare-Devil Dick had taken up his position, with his back against the wall, and in this place, where he could only be assaulted from one quarter, he stood, still keeping the revolver pointed at the young soldier.

Lights flashed without; hurried footsteps were heard upon the rocky floor. Then three men burst into the room. They looked at their leader, then at Duke, and at last at the dead man. To them the case was plain as the printed page of a book. The captive had been escaping. Yellow Yute had tried to prevent him, meeting his fate in the endeavor, and then, Dare-Devil Dick coming on the scene, matters had assumed their present aspect.

Curses arose and weapons flashed in the light. Thinking he was to be attacked, and resolving to make at least a brave fight for his life, the major was ready to spring forward, hoping to lay hands on either the toy revolver, or that which had fallen from the hand of Yellow Yute, when Dick's words stopped him.

The chief hastily ordered his men to put up their weapons, and explained to them how their comrade met his fate. It was amusing to see how they began looking over their shoulders, as if expecting to see the terrible demon at hand.

Now that there was no chance of his losing his advantage, the horse-thief chief remained lost in thought for a minute or two. Then looking up as though his mind was settled, he said:

"Carry poor Yute out into the passage, boys. This is a bad piece of business. I suppose I must go down into Dead Man's Hole, and there's no telling how many more of us will go the same way, before this is over. Our affairs have come to a crisis; we either win or lose all. What had we better do with the major, Bob?"

Blue Bob was on hand, a bloody bandage tied around his head to hold that piece of furniture, useful in its way to him, together, for what with the fearful blow from Rattling Rube's hard fist, and an equally severe one when he reached the floor, his frontispiece was badly out of repair.

Upon being called upon for his advice, he declared that the other place wasn't fit for a prison if the major had already escaped from it, and the best they could do would be to shut him in this one. It was to be hoped that the ladies had grown accustomed to seeing handsome men (here Bob leered horribly) and would not eat the soldiers up.

Dare-Devil Dick broke in upon his garrulous talk.

"That will do, Bob. Pick up those pistols. Major Spencer, I leave you here. I hope you will pass the time more pleasantly than we will, for we expect to fight for our lives. If I do not come back, you are free to go, but if possible I shall not give up my plan in regard to squeezing money out of that old lawyer-uncle-of Madge's. Kitty, good-by. Kiss

me, little girl. I've been a bad brother to you."

"No, no, Dick," said Kitty, earnestly.

Another moment and the three were alone. The heavy door slammed shut, and they could hear the bar put into its place.

Major Spencer's first thought was of escape. He began examining the place attentively. Soon the heavy discharges of guns told that a fight of some sort was in progress.

Kitty Darke was anxious for the two lovers to escape, but was undecided in regard to herself. Although she had not the slightest sympathy for his wild, lawless life, yet she loved her dashing brother dearly. To one in the secret it was equally as evident that she also loved some one else.

She had been powerless to assist Madge alone, but now that Spencer was on hand with his courage and strength something might be done.

The soldier was not long in becoming acquainted with the fact that there was an aperture in the roof, which could be reached by a daring climber. How to get the girls up bothered him, but Kitty solved this question by producing a thin but exceedingly strong rope.

Fastening one end of this to his belt, Major Spencer commenced the ascent. It was a perilous job. More than once Madge covered her eyes with horror at the mere thought of what would happen should the bold climber lose his hold.

But such a catastrophe did not occur, and at length the soldier had gained the hole. He had just pulled himself through on the solid ground, when a hated voice was heard in the cavern below.

Duke looked down. Despair seized hold of him. Dare-Devil Dick had broken in the door, and was excitedly questioning the girls.

All was lost.

CHAPTER XIV.

FOUR SECONDS, AND THEN ETERNITY.

WHEN Rattling Rube dashed out of the mountain ranch, he had no settled plan of action arranged in his mind. All that he really desired was to give his enemies the slip. He was reckoned a bold hunter on the plains, and, as I have said before, had his moods, in which he might be either reckless or just the opposite.

With the man he had hated and followed so long before his eyes, it may easily be imagined that Rube's careless fit was upon him, and yet he possessed enough good sense to know that Dare-Devil Dick spoke the truth. True, he might shoot the man down, but it would undoubtedly prove his own death, and Rube would have thought his vengeance

dearly bought if compelled to pay for it with his life.

Out into the darkness he rushed then. He heard the command of his enemy, and knew it was mere bluster that would never be put into execution. Nevertheless he could not forbear sending back that taunting, derisive laugh.

It was dangerous work running along that dark canyon, but Rube was just in the mood to do it. Either he was gifted with eyes after the style of a cat's, or else there is really something in what is said about a reckless man escaping what a careful one would fall into, for certainly he progressed without any serious mishap.

Such was his haste to reach the camp of the Regulators, that he did not wonder long at the major's absence from the rock where he had left him, but concluding that, grown tired of waiting, Duke had gone below, he hastened to do likewise.

It happened that he descended into the main canyon some distance above the place they had used before. This was unintentional on his part. He made a noise in his haste that attracted the attention of the fellow whom Big Mouth had left in the pass, while he went to the ranch for something, tobacco or brandy we will say, and hit it every time.

The discharge of firearms in the direction of the stronghold, had attracted this fellow's attention, and made him suspicious of every foreign sound; so what did he do but blaze away in the direction of the noise. Rattling Rube felt the wind raised by the ball as it hissed past, within an inch of his face.

He was a man who had never been known to take an insult, and this was deemed such in his way of looking at it. Whipping out his revolver he returned the shot. He had seen the flash, and governed his aim accordingly.

A low but hearty curse declared that his bullet had found a lodging somewhere in the corporosity of the sentinel, and satisfied with his work, Rube did not shoot again, but hastened down the mountain as rapidly as the circumstances permitted.

The Kentucky Regulators, under the hunter's orders, had pitched their camp in a secluded glen, where their presence would not be even suspected until the person coming upon the place, was almost on its borders. Rattling Rube knew just where to find them, and twenty minutes after making such a hasty exit from the mountain ranch, he stalked into camp, rifle in hand.

What he had to tell, created quite a commotion in the camp. Wildcat Turner turned as red as a turkey cock, full of importance at the thought that he had led the expedi-

tion that cleaned out these border vipers, for of course Rube would not care to claim any of the honor.

Rube was troubled a little when he found that the major had not come in, but the very worst he attributed to his absence, was that the soldier had lost himself upon the mountain-side. That Duke had in the literal meaning of the word, fallen into the hands of the horse-thieves, none of them suspected for an instant.

Now that there was a good prospect of work before them, the Regulators proved themselves to be men of energy. Rube gave his orders clearly and concisely, and before three minutes had elapsed, the camp in the gulch was deserted, save by a prowling wolf or two that fought over the bones found beside the dying embers of the fire.

Like a troop of dark phantoms the Regulators made their way up the canyon, with Wildcat Turner at their head. Rube had gone on some little distance in advance, in order to play the part of scout, for it would be such an easy thing to run into an ambush. Nothing of this happened, however; even the guard had been called in, and their passage was entirely undisputed.

At length they saw the black outlines of the mountain ranch.

Not a light showed itself. Nearer they went. The door stood open as when the hunter had seen it. Even with the windows, no attempt seemed to have been made toward defense.

"Deserted!" ejaculated Wildcat Turner, with a ring of disgust in his voice.

"Well, boys, we might as well turn back and go home, for once these rascals are on the wing, with our best horses, there's no luck for us."

Rattling Rube smiled queerly. It was not his way to give up any cherished object, until it had been proved worthless.

"Forward to the ranch," came his quick order.

Another minute and the Regulators were standing upon the very spot where Major Spencer had come through the roof, only they did not know it. Several of the men had small stable lanterns with them, something like the one used by the three farmers who met Dare-Devil Dick while on their way through the forest.

These were now produced, and a survey taken of their surroundings. It was not a very encouraging view that met their eyes. True, there were the chair, table and bench used by the horse-thieves, even the sadly thumbed deck of cards lay scattered upon the floor, but as to human beings, not a sign of one besides themselves could they see.

"I thought as much," growled Turner;

"now, where have they gone?" and he turned to the hunter, who stood beside him.

"Into yonder hole I reckon. Boys, your lanterns. Follow me; we'll clean out this nest of vipers now or never," and as he spoke, Rattling Rube sprung forward to the entrance of the passage.

This was quite undefended. The outlaws had deemed themselves secure against intrusion at all times, and had not gone to the trouble of throwing up fortifications, so now, in their time of need it seemed as though they would have cause to regret it.

"Curse the fellow; he means business. I'm afraid the boys are gone this time," muttered one of the most zealous among the pursuers.

But of Joel Whittlesey more hereafter.

Into the depths of the passage they plunged. Even Rube was beginning to believe that the outlaws had forsaken the place that had been their refuge so long. If not, why could they not see some signs of fortifications? It seemed easy enough at first, but a little reflection would have served to show what a difficult job this would have been.

The passage was clear of any loose rocks such as might have been used to make a rampart. True, small stones were abundant, but these would not have proved very serviceable.

Rattling Rube boldly took the lead, with Wildcat Turner and a lantern close behind him. In their rear came the rest, and before many seconds had gone by, these valiant Regulators were destined to see what a Western ranger could do, besides being considerably electrified themselves.

They had gone perhaps twenty yards into the passage, when upon turning a bend they came suddenly upon a blazing torch. A placard was pasted to a stick that stood upright from a circle in the floor. Upon this was roughly printed the following:

"Come a step beyond this line, and

"the whole of you will be blown to atoms.

"It is connected with a mine of gunpowder."

"For God's sake let us get out!" ejaculated Wildcat Turner, catching hold of the hunter's sleeve.

As for the men they were perfectly willing to go. Not so Rattling Rube. He heard low voices further on; this told him that the horse-thieves were still in the cavern. Common sense informed him that they would not be likely to blow themselves up for the sake of revenge.

He broke away from Turner, and rushed forward.

Those whom he had left were horrified to see a spluttering flame of fire run along in advance of him. His passing the given point had in some mysterious way fired the train,

By the light of the burning powder, the Regulators could see a small keg lying on its side. It was a keg of gunpowder, partly spilled. No human agency could stop the running fire. In just four seconds they would be blown to atoms.

As if they were petrified, the Regulators stood, frozen to the spot.

CHAPTER XV.

A BATTLE TO THE DEATH.

Four seconds, and then the old mountain would be shaken by a tremendous explosion. One fifteenth part of a minute, and their bodies would be blown into a thousand pieces. It was the most exciting period of their lives.

The Regulators stood like so many statues, frozen with horror; and had it been possible for them to have saved their lives by a simple raising of the hand, not one of them would have been able to do it. And yet they were brave men, who, on ordinary occasions, could show an astonishing amount of self-possession. They were simply paralyzed with the extreme horror of the situation.

True, Rattling Rube was the exception. He had seen the running fire and the keg of powder, but did not come to a halt. There was not the slightest chance of his reaching the spot in less than double the time required for the flame to gain the keg.

The four seconds passed. There had been given but little time for the men to think, but a drowning man has ideas like flashes of lightning, and there is no telling what they ran over in their individual minds during the time that intervened before the explosion.

The fire draws closer; it is within a foot of the keg; now it has the powder that has been spilled; the fearful instant has come; there is a flash of flame that blinds the Regulator's eyes as the outlying powder catches, and then—total darkness.

The Regulators do not know whether they are in the other world or not; their expected doom has made such a deep impression upon their minds that they can hardly collect themselves.

What had happened?

No one could have extinguished the fire, for it had reached the keg of powder when all the force of the world could not have saved them.

Wildcat Turner had actually turned purple in the face when this horrible fate seemed threatening them, but he was the first to recover his wits.

"Forward with the lights!" he roared.

The men followed close behind him with their lanterns. A dozen long strides sufficed to bring them to the spot where the object of their late terror stood, Wildcat Turner stoop-

ed over the keg and looked at the powder. Then he gave it a contemptuous kick.

"Black sand!" he exclaimed, in derision.

The puzzle looks so simple after it has been explained. So the envious courtiers thought when Columbus returned from his eventful voyage. Now that the mystery was solved, it would have been hard to find a man among the Regulators who had not suspected the truth from the first.

To be candid, however, there was one of them who was well aware of the fact that his last moment on this footstool had not yet arrived, and this individual was Joe Whittlesey.

The Regulators were allowed but little time for reflection. Sounds came to their ears very like those that would emanate from a fight between men, whose worst passions were aroused. Following this the sharp detonation of deadly revolvers rung out, echoing along the long underground passage.

"Forward! it is our friend!" shouted Wildcat Turner, as a yell such as only a wild Western ranger could give birth to, pealed forth.

Cowards are scarce articles among the Kentucky backwoods of to-day, even as they were at this period. Without any hesitation the Regulators rushed along.

The sight that met their eyes upon rounding the next bend was one they would never forget. Rube was battling against five men. A sixth lay upon the rocky floor of the cavern, motionless, for a ball from the hunter's revolver had passed through his brain.

Rattling Rube was a perfect devil when aroused; I can call him nothing else. He would have thrown himself into the midst of an opposing army without the slightest hesitation. Make the object worth his while, and nothing but death could prevent his gaining it.

He was wounded in several places; the blood trickled down his face from a cut in his head, giving him a fearful appearance. With a smoking revolver in one hand, and a bloody knife held in the other, he leaped about among the horse-thieves like a panther such was his agility in dealing blows, and avoiding them in return. One foe had already been disposed of, while a second had crawled away with a ball somewhere in his body.

Probably Rube would have been killed in the end had there been no assistance at hand, for one man can hardly hold out successfully against seven, but at the rate he was going when the Regulators hove in sight, he was getting away with them pretty lively.

Wildcat Turner uttered a war-cry in so hoarse a tone that it resembled the croaking of a bull-frog more than anything else. In

another instant the Kentucky Regulators were upon those whom they had hated so long, and yet who had managed to elude their vigilance. It was a terrible struggle, but exceedingly short.

From the first it was evident that the horse-thieves wanted to make their escape, and leave the field to their foes. In this they were frustrated by the valor and determination of the Vigilantes, and each outlaw, fiercely assaulted, was obliged to defend himself. While his face was toward his foes, there was always a chance, but if he turned his back it would be the signal for the discharge of a death-dealing revolver or two. So they fought with a courage born of despair.

The fight being one-sided, was, as I have said, of brief duration. When three minutes had passed, two more outlaws lay upon the rocks with the life-blood oozing from terrible wounds.

Two more miscreants were held prisoners between some of the Regulators. Rattling Rube uttered a hearty curse. After all their work, the king-pin had escaped; Dare-Devil Dick had vanished!

"Forward!" commanded the indomitable Rube, and away they went.

CHAPTER XVI.

BACKWOODS JUSTICE.

WHEN Major Spencer looked down and saw the hated form of the handsome horse-thief burst into the place, he knew that all was lost. Had he possessed either a rifle or revolver, he would not have hesitated a minute, but would have sent its contents at his enemy. Having nothing of the kind, he could only watch and wait.

Dare-Devil Dick seemed to question the girls, from whom he could get no satisfactory replies, judging from his fury. Then his eyes fell upon the dangling rope, which he followed upward, but Duke was hidden from view by the dense shadows.

What followed occupied but a minute. The major realized that his friends the Regulators, led by Rattling Rube, had entered the cavern; that a fight had occurred, from which the chief alone came out alive. He heard Dare-Devil Dick relate how he had blocked the passage, which obstruction would take half an hour of his enemies' time to clear away. Long before this he expected to have left the cavern far behind him.

The two girls were to put on what wraps they had at once. His face was flushed with rage at being chased by the men whom he had professed to despise, and Madge knew it would not do to anger him further. She cast one appealing glance up at the spot where she

knew her lover was, and then did as the horse-thief commanded.

Major Spencer saw them leave the place by means of the door. He waited several minutes to make sure that it was not a design to lure him down, and then, assisted materially by the rope, he lowered himself into the cavern.

As soon as he touched the rocky floor, he seized the light and darted into the passage. Turning to the left, he hurried on. There was no possibility of his getting lost, for his route lay straight ahead of him.

In a few minutes he came upon a natural cavern of tremendous proportions, which had been used as a stable by the thieves. Two horses were even then in it, a beautiful gray, and an equally fine coal-black stallion. That there had been three others, Duke easily discovered, and he knew that Dare-Devil Dick had ridden away with the girls.

Should he immediately pursue, or get Rube's assistance?

Reflection soon told him that this was all he could do, for the night was dark, and he had no means of telling in what direction they had gone. Before leaving the great cavern, Duke hunted up the rear entrance, and going outside, found that it was reached by a narrow gully, which would prove a hard road for a stranger to travel on horseback in the dark.

Ten minutes later he was in the passage, examining the obstruction the wily chief had thrown in the way of the furious Regulators. This consisted of a mass of rocks which had been so nicely balanced upon a huge shelf, that a single man's strength when applied to the lever, served to detach the fearful weight, and thus firmly block the passage.

Voices could be heard on the other side of this impediment, together with the blows from some instruments wielded by sturdy arms. In a short time an iron bar broke through, and then a large opening was made. Quickly the men crawled into view, foremost of whom Duke recognized his friend, the hunter.

Rattling Rube was amazed when he rose to his full height, to find himself face to face with the major. How came he in the horse-thieves' den, unbound? It was a puzzle, but Duke soon explained it, and as they hurried toward the stable, Rube related what had befallen them since Spencer was missing.

No sooner had Wildcat Turner set eyes upon the gray steed, than he gave vent to a shout of royal satisfaction. It was his Sachem, whom the thieves had so lately stolen. Coleburn was also in ecstasies over the recovery of his Black Roger.

Rube soon announced it as his opinion that it was utterly impossible to make any

move before morning, and that therefore they might as well get some sleep. Wildcat Turner declared that there was some business on hand which would be all the better for receiving prompt attention.

He gave some gruff orders, and the two prisoners were brought before him, their hands securely bound. A couple of running loops were made at the end of as many ropes, which, in their turn, were passed over stones which projected from the wall of the great cavern about twenty feet from the ground, in a charmingly convenient manner.

"Now, you scoundrels, what have you to say?" thundered the colonel, shaking his fist under their noses.

Big Mouth began whining like a whipped cur. As for Blue Bob he was defiant to the last, and with a recklessness that savored strongly of madness, he spat in the fiery face of the little man.

"Up with them," roared he, in a rage.

"One minute," said Blue Bob; "we ain't going to die like dogs, and have one just as bad as us laughing in his sleeve. Turner, that's the man what's done more to harm you than all the rest of us put together. I owe him a grudge; but I'm telling God's honest truth now. He kept the captain fully informed about your stables. Proof is it? Look back; has Joel Whittlesey ever lost a horse? Now, do your worst; I defy ye."

"Seize that man," roared Turner. "I have long had my suspicions about him. Now there'll be one farm in Kentucky without an owner, if there's any virtue in ropes."

Joel Whittlesey tried to declare his innocence, but his tongue seemed to cling to the roof of his mouth. There was not a man among those stern farmers but fully believed the scoundrel guilty, and not a voice was raised in opposition to these orders.

Willing hands placed the farmer-spy beside the two rascals, and at a signal from Turner, the three were lifted from their feet. The major turned his head away, unwilling to witness the hanging, although it would not have been the first he, as a soldier, had seen. They spent what was left of the night in the cavern where Madge and Kitty had lived for so long a time.

Rattling Rube heard all that his companion had to say about the girls, with great interest; but did not suspect how his companion started every time Kitty's name was mentioned.

During the fight with the hunter one man had limped away badly wounded, as the reader will perhaps remember. Major Spencer came upon him early in the morning, lying in a little recess of the main passage.

It was Tom Crawley.

When the Regulators saw the man whom

they had buried in the great forest several days back, and who had been counted on as dead, they expressed a unanimous desire for his immediate execution. The poor wretch could offer no resistance, and probably he would have swung in the same manner as did his comrades, but for Duke.

He had stepped into the place where the horse-thieves had left him in durance vile, just for curiosity, and found a piece of paper that Crawley had pushed under the door, just after Duke had made his escape from the prison cell. It was a queer piece of writing, being inscribed with a lead-pencil on the back of an old envelope.

This is the way it read:

"TO MAJOR SPENCER:—You saved my life the other day, and Tom Crawley, ruff man az he is, ain't the one to fureget it nether. About the middle of the nite, you will hear a scratching noise at the dor. It will be me. Tom will get you out of this, and don't you fureget it nether. TOM CRAWLEY."

It was lucky for the man that he had let his gratitude get the better of his rough nature, for it was certainly the means of saving his life. Major Spencer declared that as he had discovered the horse-thief, he claimed him; and none could dispute it.

"Tom Crawley, go free, and lead a better life," he said.

The man was visibly affected at Duke's noble action.

"Major," said he earnestly, "from this day, I shall lead an honest life. You may laugh, but I have too much honor to betray the captain I swore allegiance to. Although I can't tell you where he is, I wish you all success, and I know with that bloodhound" (pointing to Rattling Rube who smiled at the compliment) "to follow the trail, Dare-Devil Dick will never get away. Good-by, boys; you won't be troubled with me again; after this Kentucky ain't the safest place in the world for Tom Crawley," saying which the horse-thief vanished from view, nor was he ever seen again by them.

Rube was almost as impatient to be off as his younger companion, and as soon as it was light enough to see their way, the two rode down the gully. The Regulators were to follow on foot, for, stirred up by the recent fight, Wildcat Turner was resolved to be in at the death.

CHAPTER XVII.

ON THE TRAIL.

BOTH Rattling Rube and Duke Spencer were anxious to overtake those whom they pursued. The former bore the prince of horse-thieves a deadly hatred, and besides this, what Dare-Devil Dick had said when the rifle of the hunter was bearing full upon him, had stirred up the stream of memory,

as one would take a stick and agitate the waters of some quiet pond.

On the other side, Major Spencer's sole idea was to save his darling from the hands of his enemy. There was comfort in the knowledge that no harm would befall her save that of being wholly separated from her friends by this strange whim of the outlaw's. Where they were going neither of them had the slightest idea, but they would pursue to the end.

The gully continued for perhaps two hundred yards. Then it debouched into a wide canyon. Down this the two hunters thundered as the sun began to peep above the ragged outline that indicated the Eastern horizon. This seemed to make a gradual descent, and in an hour's time they struck the low lands.

Dare-Devil Dick had kept along the foot of the mountains, as if he had a purpose in view. Perhaps he desired to avoid attracting the attention of any roving backwoodsman who might happen to be traveling across the low country, and to whose generosity and manliness Madge could appeal for aid. She would not have been compelled to cry for assistance twice to a Kentuckian.

Again, there was another view of the case, which they were inclined to believe was the truth, as the day advanced. Without a doubt, the horse-thief was aiming for some place where he had friends, and from the aspect of the country it seemed very probable that he would find these among the mountains.

The trail was very easy to find and keep, as the soil was moist, and gave deep impressions of the horses' hoofs. They rode at a full gallop, Rube a little in advance, with his head bent low.

Thus the morning passed away.

At noon they came to where, as they had suspected it would, the trail led up into the mountains again.

"Probably we'll have to clean out another nest of vipers before we can rescue your little Madge," said Rube, as they toiled up the canyon.

His words came true, but he did not suspect when he spoke them, what a strange nest of vipers they were drawing near.

"I wonder what that means?" said Rube, at length, halting and pointing just at his horse's feet. "I've noticed it several times down on the level land. What do you make it out to be?"

"The imprint of a man's foot, although it's so flat I couldn't swear to it. I don't see any heel-marks; looks more to me like an Indian moccasin, but that's absurd in Kentucky," answered the major, actually getting off his horse and examining the mark.

"You've hit it exactly, major. A moccasin made it. Now the next point under dis-

cussion is, who wore the moccasin? Could one of the men have escaped and accompanied them on foot?"

"Impossible; all were killed or captured that I knew of. Besides, not one of them would be likely to wear moccasins. Depend upon it, this was made by some roving hunter," said Spencer, decisively.

"He's been following the trail then. Do you know that's a queer-shaped foot print? I only remember one other like it in my life, and as I've trailed hundreds in my time, I've looked on many a footprint. The one I speak of was Joe Burns's. He's dead now; you remember I told you about him. One of my reasons for coming East was to visit his old home somewhere in Kentucky, but I lost the address, and had given up all thought of it when I met you. Poor Joey! those wolves have paid dearly for that scrape."

They rode along in silence.

The mountains were extremely wild and rugged. Not a human soul who had respect for the saw, lived within a radius of perhaps fifty miles. Such another place for the home of an outlaw could not be found anywhere.

Rube and the major had no doubt but what they were going to such a place, and they had even gone so far as to discuss the question as to whether they had better wait for their friends to come up or assault the stronghold at once.

The future would prove how useless it was for them to take things for granted, but at the time they were content to lay their plans.

When the mountain-top was reached, it was almost sunset. Down in the valley they had left the shadows were already stealing like so many ghosts, hurrying here, there, and everywhere, as if detecting and closing every avenue through which the light might force its way.

True, on the other side where they now found themselves, it bade fair to remain light for an hour or more. Resolved to make the most of this time, they urged their horses forward, and went down the declivity at quite a rapid pace.

At length the shadows began creeping around them; twilight, so gentle and soft in its shades, was now retreating before the rapid advance of night. Spencer thought it would be dangerous to go any further over this unknown ground, but Rattling Rube had caught a glimpse of an opening ahead, which he thought they could gain before darkness settled in.

A few minutes later and it was reached. In the dusk of the evening they found themselves looking upon the blackness that indi-

cated a valley in the heart of the mountains. Outlined against the western sky, and also to the north, they could see the rough tops of the high hills that inclosed the place.

Did their trail end here?

Rube caught sight of a light away down in the valley, which shone like a beacon or a star. It came from a window; the valley was inhabited.

CHAPTER XVIII

BRIAN THE WOLF-HERDER.

"WHAT, in the name of all that's wonderful, is that?"

The still silence of the night had been rudely disturbed. Even as our hunter-friends looked down toward that solitary light, and wondered what would attend their efforts, success or failure, a terrible din arose in the valley.

First a single howl sounded, clear and distinct; then a second joined in, and a third, and a fourth, until the two men actually gaped in amazement. Major Spencer's question could hardly be heard above the racket.

"Hang me if I know. I could have sworn that they were wolf voices; I've heard enough to know 'em, but that's impossible. Them critters ain't in full chase of anything, but cooped up, every time. Reckon it must be some hunter, with a yard full of hounds, though I'd like to swear that there's wolf-blood among 'em."

The clamor was now gradually dying away, and they could hear a man's gruff tones shouting the words:

"Hold yer noise, ye varmints! Quiet, now, or I'll take the hides off some of ye," accompanied by the sharp cracking of a whip.

The hunters stood listening until silence came. Both were now convinced that it was an immense pack of dogs, although the wolf-hater would not give up his idea that there was wolf-blood among them, for his trained ear was ever ready to catch their detested notes.

"What shall we do?" asked the major, quite willing that his older and more experienced friend should take the lead.

"Go down, of course, and do our work. First of all we want to hide our horses somewhere near here. We will reclaim them again for their owners, if we live through the tussle," said Rube.

Dismounting, they led their animals to one side and fastened them securely with their bridles to some of the rocks. Then the descent began. The path was not as rough as they had expected, and would probably have been much smoother had they been able to see where to place their feet.

After perhaps twenty minutes of this sort of work, they reached what was, without doubt, the level of the little valley, hidden among the very wildest mountains of Kentucky. Soft grass could be felt under their feet, and the low murmur of a running brook sounded from the unknown region to their right.

They went straight forward.

The gloom was even more intense down here than on the mountain side, and all they had for a guide, was the light which still flashed from the window. It was larger and brighter now, in consequence of their being much closer.

As they drew nearer, their caution became redoubled. All at once the light seemed to go out as they thought. Rattling Rube realized the true state of affairs a few moments later, when he tripped, and in trying to save himself from a fall, banged up against a high fence made of long pickets, with a board here and there nailed over some crack larger than ordinary. It was this that had come between the light and themselves.

His accident necessarily made a little noise. The response was almost instantaneous. Even Rube started back in dismay as a prolonged howl rung out within a yard of him, followed by a chorus from half a hundred throats.

The clamor so close to their ears was perfectly fearful. Duke put his hands to his head; but upon seeing spears of light show through the cracks in the high board fence, he quickly followed Rattling Rube's example, and springing forward, glued his eyes to one of the crevices.

The inclosure was a yard, perhaps twenty yards square. A two-story frame house stood at the further end. From an open door, a gigantic man, heavily bearded, had suddenly come forth. In one hand he carried a lighted lamp, while the other held a long black snake whip, which he cracked with a vicious snap as he spoke.

The yard was a perfect mass of leaping, howling animals. There might have been fifty; there might have been two hundred; the major could not tell. At first he had taken it for granted that they were hunting-dogs, but he quickly realized his mistake.

They were gaunt wolves.

Astonishment kept both the hunters mute, and they watched the colossal figure that had appeared so suddenly upon the scene.

"Quiet, ye varmints! Ye act as if the devil had got into ye. Thar will be no sleep for Brian to-night. As sure as I'm a living man I'll clean out half of ye to-morrow. Quiet, I say."

His words, accompanied by a fierce cracking of his whip, which the animals in all probability knew too well, served to stop the

fearful racket, and absolute silence fell upon the scene. Then Brian, as the man had called himself, withdrew.

"Thar," said Rube in triumph, "I knew a wolf's howl. Reckon if I was dying I'd rise up and have a crack at the varmints after nearly setting me crazy that time. Now, what do you make of this, major?"

"I am beginning to understand it somewhat. When we were with the Regulators I heard them mention this man's name. They said he was a noted wolf-hunter who lived somewhere among the wild mountains spending all of his time in hunting wolves, for the scalps of which he received a certain amount from head-quarters. The animals have been so bad the last few years that the authorities took this means of ridding the state of them."

"I see, I see," said Rattling Rube, "and this old coon found the trade so profitable that he has actually started a wolf farm. Now the question is, shall we find those we seek here?"

"That can be easily answered; let us move forward toward the house. Keep away from the fence, or you will have the brutes in full cry again. I can hear them sniffling at the cracks," and the major stepped ahead as he spoke.

"My hand is itching to take every one of their scalps, and I'll do it, too. When that neat job is accomplished, poor Joe Burns, my old comrade, will be well avenged. Howl away, ye brutes, the time for your extermination is drawing near. How's that, major? Are we drawing near the house?"

"Hush! the window is just beyond us. They've drawn a curtain over it. We will move along to the door. Have your gun ready, Rube. There may be some tough work ahead," whispered the major.

Passing the window, from which the light had been entirely hidden, they went on, expecting to find a door. Nor were they mistaken in their surmise. The door was there, sure enough.

Rattling Rube now took the lead. The major expected to see him knock, but instead of this he lifted the latch, and quietly stepped in. They entered a hall that was quite dark. A narrow strip of yellow light told of a door beyond, and to this Rube walked.

Beyond it the low murmur of voices could be heard, and after listening half a minute they distinguished the voices of Dare-Devil Dick and Brian the wolf-slayer. There was at least one other but they had never heard it before.

"Ready boy?" asked Rube, his hand on the door.

"Ready," answered the major in a steady voice.

"Then the curtain will go up."

With these words the bold hunter pushed open the door and stepped into the room to find himself face to face with five men.

CHAPTER XIX.

A CLEAN SWEEP.

RATTLING RUBE was a little astonished himself. He had expected to see two men in the room, perhaps three at the outside, but not five. Although this may have been the case he did not for an instant lose the admirable presence of mind that almost invariably marked his movements.

"Rube Rand, by the eternal!"

As Dare-Devil Dick uttered this exclamation, he sprung to his feet. He had been seated at a rough table, along with the rest, and from their attitudes, together with the glasses that were in plain view, it was easy to judge that the prince of horse-thieves, whom they looked up to as a man to be obeyed, had been regaling the others with an account of the disaster that had overtaken his band.

As a general thing he was lightning on the trigger, but Rube got the "drop" on him, as a Texan would say. While the outlaw's hand still rested on his pistol, he realized that the hunter's rifle was bearing directly on his heart.

"Stop!" said Rube, sternly.

Not a hand moved in that room. Just behind the hunter a second form had made its appearance, and Major Spencer stood there, revolver in hand.

"What have you done with the girls, Dick Darke?"

"I've done nothing with them. Kitty chose to come with me, and Madge couldn't be left alone. I suppose the game is up now, but if there was any show, I'd fight you to the end. I doubt not but what you call this a fair thing, twenty to five," said the horse-thief in a savage tone.

Major Spencer should have been wise enough to have kept silent, but the taunting tone of the outlaw made him speak before he realized what he was saying.

"You are mistaken; the odds are in your favor; it is two against five," he said, quickly.

"Then Turner and his wildcats are not on hand. Boys, do you hear that?" cried Dare-Devil Dick, turning to his friends.

"Clean sweep, my hearties. Leave the hunter to me. At 'em ye go, and—" but the balance of Brian's words were drowned in the crack of the hunter's rifle.

Fate seemed to have decided that Rattling Rube should not kill the brother of the girl whom he loved, even though he did his level best to bring such an event to pass. Once before had the horse-thief been in just such

a situation, and he had escaped the death that hovered over his head.

Some sense of intuition must have told him when Rube, urged by the warlike movements of the fierce men opposed to him, was about to pull the trigger, for just at that very instant he made a quick leap to one side.

The bullet buried itself harmlessly in the timber composing the wall, and yet Dick had a very narrow escape of it, as the slit in his sleeve testified. One of his ruffianly-looking friends was not so fortunate. The crack of Major Spencer's revolver sounded directly after the rifle-shot.

A horrified shout of intense agony burst from the man at whose broad breast the weapon had been aimed. He fell back as though struck by a heavy club. One frantic grasp at the empty air for support, as a drowning man might clutch at a straw, and the fellow toppled over. Death had come with terrible suddenness, and in all probability his life was gone before he touched the floor.

The others made no halt. Common sense told them that to do so was to waste the precious seconds, and enable their enemies to keep their advantage. They were still two to one.

Rattling Rube knew he would have no time to draw his six-shooter, so he instantly clubbed his rifle. The giant wolf-herder and Dare-Devil Dick assaulted him.

What occurred during the next minute would take five times as long to narrate. Brian was much larger than the hunter, and in a hand-to-hand conflict, his brute strength might have overcome Rube's suppleness, but the latter had no intention of meeting the ruffian wolf-herder in that way.

Anxious to close with the hunter, Brian rushed forward. In his haste he forgot discretion. Down rushed the clubbed rifle with all the force Rube was capable of throwing into the blow. It took Brian square on the side of the head, and sent him over into a corner where he lay like one dead, all huddled up and quite motionless. The wonder was that his skull was not crushed, as nine out of ten would have gone in like an egg-shell.

Rattling Rube had now but one enemy to deal with, and that his mortal foe, Dare-Devil Dick. The hunter saw the horse-thief across the room with a pistol in his hand, and felt for his own weapon. To his dismay it had slipped from his belt, probably when he stumbled against the fence; at any rate it was gone.

He was actually defenseless, and Dick had his revolver ready.

The two men who sprung to meet the major were savage-looking cases, whom he

would have no more compunction in slaying than so many wolves. Always providing the fortune of war decided in his favor. By a quick movement he dodged the shot of one of them delivered at short range.

As he sprung aside, the major managed to pull back the hammer of his revolver. When the weapon spoke, one of his foes staggered up against the wall, all the fight taken completely out of him, for he had a ragged hole in his breast through which his life-blood was spurting with every heart-throb.

Before the major could make use of his weapon again, the other fellow had sprung forward and closed with him. Locked in each other's arms, they were so evenly matched in strength, that had they been alone the two might have struggled on for hours, until exhaustion overtook one or both of them.

Rattling Rube's chances of escaping a shot were very slim. He must either leap at Dare-Devil Dick, or else try to pick up a heavy revolver that lay close to his feet. He chose to attempt the latter. As he stooped over, the horse-thief took a dead aim.

It looked as though Rube had but one chance in a hundred, but they had not calculated on a new actor making his appearance upon the scene. Dare-Devil Dick's back was toward the large window, over which the curtain had been pulled.

Even as he raised his revolver there was a tremendous crash, as a large body bounded through this, breaking both glass and curtain. The horse-thief turned to find himself face to face with the wild man of the mountains! Fire Wolf, in all his hideousness, stood before him, a partially burning torch in one hand, and the knife red with the blood of former victims in the other.

For once the daring chief was frozen literally with horror, and could neither move hand nor foot.

"At last!" yelled the horrible man-wolf, springing forward. A blow, swift and deadly as the bolt from heaven, and Dare-Devil Dick fell to the floor, stabbed through the heart.

The prince had stolen his last horse.

CHAPTER XX.

FIRE WOLF'S LAST BLOW.

"My God! I am killed!" burst from the lips of the dashing outlaw.

His left hand was pressed against his breast, and between the white fingers oozed the crimson tide of life. There was but a minute left him at the most. His glaring eyes were fixed on the form of the wolf-man who seemed to be looking upon his work with satisfaction. With a last effort Dare-Devil Dick raised the arm that held the revolver. Giving one of his horrible cries, the

fearful creature sprung forward as if he realized his danger, and intended trying to distract the other's aim.

He was too late.

The pistol sounded, sharp and clear. Dare-Devil Dick fell back dead, and the form that toppled over upon him, had no more life in it than was contained in the horse-thief's body. Fire Wolf had lived to see the last of the band whom he seemed to hate so heartily, go under, and had then given up the ghost.

Our friends now had their attention directed to another quarter. When the fearful form of the man-wolf made its appearance, Major Spencer and his antagonist had involuntarily let go each other. Now that the tragedy in that direction was over, the horse-thief saw a chance to escape, and ran from the room.

Rattling Rube and the major followed in close pursuit.

Whatever object the fellow had in view I cannot say. Perhaps he intended using the girls as a means of saving his life. At any rate, instead of running out of the door, he darted up-stairs. Here a lantern swung in the hall. The man tried to force an entrance into the first room, but failed, owing to the fact that the girls had locked the door.

Into the next room he plunged, nearly wild with fear, and hotly pursued by the ranger. Thinking only of the danger behind, the fellow took a flying leap through the window, carrying sash and all with him. This might have saved him only for one unfortunate thing. It happened that he chose the wrong window.

Rube heard loud cries below. Then came a pistol-shot, followed by a terrible howling. The man's shouts grew fainter. He had leaped into the den of wolves and perished miserably.

Another moment and Major Spencer had Madge in his arms. Rube spoke a few words to Kittie, whose first thought was her brother, and before she could be prevented, the girl had run down-stairs to where he lay. Kitty loved him in spite of his faults, nor did Rube think any the less of her because of it.

He took hold of the dead Fire Wolf and drew him away, after which he looked at him more closely. It was a man of immense build and without doubt crazy. With an ingenuity that could only originate in a madman's brain he had invented a head-covering in exact imitation of that of a gigantic wolf.

This Rube removed, totally unsuspecting of the great surprise in store for him. He uttered a cry, and bent over the dead man.

"Great Heavens! what mystery is this? My chum, Joe Burns!"

It was even so. Further scrutiny revealed

evidences of Fire Wolf's being that person, that were beyond dispute.

The great mystery was never solved by Rattling Rube. How his chum had escaped from the wolves he never knew. The only theory that seemed plausible, was that Joe Burns had gone crazy in the tree, and either fought his way through the savage creatures or remained in his perch until they left. The bones Rube saw must have been those of an Indian. Perhaps he fell at the hands of the madman; this could never be discovered.

But this theory did not explain the presence of the crazed hunter in his native country, his hatred for Dare-Devil Dick, what injury that personage had done him, and why his crazy notions made him assume the guise of a wolf. These questions were a matter of speculation to Rattling Rube long after he had committed the body to the grave, but Fire Wolf's secret was buried with him.

It was about an hour after daybreak, when the Regulators came in sight. Rube had been at work for some time past, popping over the ravenous wolves. Seated in the upper room of the house he banged away at them until every one had bitten the dust.

There were exactly sixty-three dead wolves.

As to the owner of the ranch, he was lying, bound hand and foot, in a corner of his own house. The Regulators had a little interview with the giant wolf-herder. When they left the ranch he was kindly suffered to remain behind, but in such a peculiar situation that he could not appreciate the advantage his high position should have given him. Another Kentucky rope had been used, and Brian, the wolf-herder, was no more.

Relieved of their untiring foe, Major Spencer and Madge hastened to join the latter's guardian, who was leading a rigorous search in another part of the State, where he thought he had a clew.

Thinking he might as well have it done with, now that he was in the East, Major Spencer proposed something to blushing Madge, and urged the matter so strongly, that when he went back to his border post he took a bride with him. So you see the uncle lost his birdie after all although by fair means.

Handsome Rube had long loved Kitty Darke. It was her brother who had separated them, and the dashing hunter soon won her hand, as he had long before won her heart. Some of the Kentucky Regulators still live. Among them I might mention Wildcat Turner. His property was owned by Major Spencer, which accounted for his respect toward the soldier. At this late day Kentucky is sadly in need of such a gallant band of Regulators.

THE END.

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